

The **Sidekick**
Never Gets the
Girl, Let Alone
the Protag's
Sister!



Author:
Toshizo

Illustrator:
U35



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Prologue

“Yeah... Yeah, I’m doing well. We’re getting by just fine. Well, Hikari’s... Nah, never mind.”

Ayase Kaito dried his hair with a towel as he spoke with his father on the phone. Both of his parents had been working overseas for quite a long time. He only saw them two or three times a year when they came back to visit during their vacations. Leaving their children in Japan to fend for themselves must’ve been a major source of worry for them, and they called incessantly to check up on Kaito and his sister as a result.

Thanks in part to their calls, Kaito never felt especially lonely. His parents made sure to send them plenty of money to take care of their daily expenses—more than they needed, really—and his sister was almost *too* responsible, which certainly helped as well. Even though they’d been left on their own, their lifestyle never felt uncomfortable in the slightest.

However, at that moment, Kaito was hiding something from his parents. Something about his all-too-responsible little sister, Ayase Hikari.

From his perspective, Hikari was outstanding in just about every area. Her academic and athletic abilities were well above average, she was both cheerful and diligent, and she was popular to boot. She always made sure to help out with the household chores even before their parents moved away, and that experience ended up being a major boon after they started living independently.

In spite of all that, though, she hadn’t gone to school for almost an entire week. She wouldn’t explain why either—not even to Kaito. At first he’d thought it might be something hard to share with a boy, family or not, but she was just as unwilling to open up to their mutual friend, Kotou Tsumugi.

She wouldn’t go to school, but she wasn’t acting like a *complete* shut-in. She’d leave her room and walk around the house like everything was perfectly normal. She even left the house on occasion. Her truancy aside, she was acting

the same as ever.

Actually, no. Not quite... Kaito rested his chin in his hand as he considered her recent behavior. She might've been acting slightly strangely after all, in retrospect. For one thing, she'd sink into absentminded thought a lot more often than she used to, only to suddenly blush, shake her head, and bury her face in a pillow a moment later. She'd jump whenever her phone buzzed, look at the screen, then slump her shoulders with disappointment—but *sometimes*, she'd smile and hum happily instead. She'd been behaving in all sorts of strange ways that Kaito had never seen from her before.

He hadn't the faintest clue what could be causing it. Or perhaps it'd be better to say that he *couldn't* have had the faintest idea. Hikari was embroiled in an emotion that Kaito himself had never experienced.

"Kaito, are you there? What's wrong?"

"Ah, it's nothing." He'd been so preoccupied thinking about Hikari's condition, he'd frozen up entirely. His father's questioning voice finally snapped him back to reality. "Uhh, what were we talking about? Hikari, right?" He lowered the phone and shouted. "*Heeey, Hikari!* Dad's on the phone!"

He knew she was upstairs and intended to pass the phone to her. Strangely enough, though, she didn't reply. This was far from the first time he'd called her down for a phone call; she *never* ignored him. He climbed up the staircase and knocked on her door. Not only did she not respond, he also couldn't hear *any* noise coming from her room at all.

"Hikari? I'm coming in!" He slowly cracked the door open. The lights were off, so he couldn't see much, but he could just barely hear the soft, steady sound of her breathing. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he finally noticed her. She was lying on her bed in her pajamas, fast asleep. "Hikari? Huh, weird. She almost never goes to sleep this early..." he mused. "Oh, dad? I guess she already fell asleep... Yeah, maybe next time... Right, sounds good."

He certainly couldn't bring himself to wake her up just for a phone call. He stepped out of her room—then stopped in his tracks. Something felt slightly, subtly *off*. But when he turned around and glanced back into her room, nothing seemed out of place—not that he knew her room well enough to know if

anything was particularly different.

“Oh, that’s it... The window’s open,” he muttered as he finally noticed her curtains wafting in the gentle breeze. Hikari’s room had a window that looked out onto the house’s second-floor balcony, and it had been left open. That would be what had caught his attention. “That girl, I swear. I keep telling her she can just turn the AC on... Oh, sorry, dad, don’t worry about it.”

Kaito turned his attention back to the phone as he closed the window and switched on the air conditioner. He took a moment to make sure it was working properly, then left Hikari’s room for good.

At no point did Kaito notice that *he* was standing just outside on the balcony.



“Hooooly crap...”

I, Kunugi Kou, let out the breath I hadn’t even realized I was holding and whispered to myself in relief. I seriously thought the jig was up when Kaito came over to the window, but in the end, he shut it without noticing me at all.

Everything about that whole adventure had been *way* too close. Carrying Ayase to her house without alerting their neighbors, climbing up to her balcony, infiltrating her room, and returning her to her bed was bad enough already, but just as I’d pulled that off, I heard Kaito call for her. I seriously thought I was about to have a heart attack.

Oh wait, crap, her shoes... Screw it, guess I’m keeping ’em for now. I wasn’t about to make my way down into their entryway to put them back. That’d be way too risky, and I’d end up back here before too long, one way or another. I just had to stealthily put them back where they belong when I had the chance.

In any case, I was absolutely exhausted. I was so tired I didn’t even want to put in the effort to get off the balcony, but unfortunately, I didn’t really have a choice. If I’d let myself pass out there, I’d almost certainly get discovered the next morning and be forever branded as the creeper who snuck up onto his

best friend's sister's balcony in the dead of night. That'd make my best friend's opinion of me drop down to a subterranean level in an instant, and even worse, Ayase Hikari would once again be made aware of my existence.

I tottered to my feet and leapt from the balcony to the wall that surrounded their plot of land, then from the wall to the ground, keeping as quiet as I could possibly manage.

Or, well, I *tried* to do all that. In reality, I pretty much flopped straight from the balcony to the ground in a heap. That made just a *bit* of noise, but a few moments passed and none of their neighbors came out to take a look, so I figured I was probably safe.

In one sense, anyway. I gasped and wheezed—it felt like I could barely breathe at all. It was like my whole body was on fire, and my head in particular hurt so much I was worried my brain might actually be melting. Tuckering myself out by carrying Ayase was certainly part of the problem, but I knew the odds were high that it was far from the full picture.

In all likelihood, using my magic when I didn't have the mana necessary was what had put me in that state. I'd basically squeezed water from a stone. From a standards-of-modern-society perspective, of course, that entire train of thought was absurd—magic doesn't exist outside of fiction and fairy tales! Except, unfortunately, it *does* if you're me. It's one of the very few skills I actually have. I don't have a whimsical animal companion that rides around on my shoulder and gives me advice, and I *definitely* don't run into walls in train stations with an owl and a suitcase in tow, but magic? That, I can do.

By my own assessment, though, the best way to describe myself would be a background character. If I *had* to assign myself a distinguishing trait, it would be my association with my bosom buddy Ayase Kaito: a genuine rom-com protagonist who saw fit to bless this joyless modern society with his presence. I'm a background extra who doubles as his best friend—in short, I'm his best friend sidekick! Dunno if that title makes sense to anyone else, but I like it, at least.

"Ugggh..." My heart skipped a beat, possibly to punish me for going off on a

happy-go-lucky mental tangent. The pain grew so intense for a moment that I crouched over, clutching my chest. I was sweating like a pig.

A long time ago, the boy I had called my best friend *before* I met Kaito taught me about magic. He explained that “using magic when you’re out of mana’s like putting an empty kettle on the fire.” If there’s nothing in the kettle for the fire to boil, then the kettle itself ends up scorched. It seemed quite likely that I was in precisely that state: I’d forced my body to put out magical power that it didn’t actually have, and that power left me charred and burned as a result.

I’d cast my magic on Hikari. To be clear, I can’t stylishly manifest bursts of flame from thin air nor conjure up a magical breeze to flip girls’ skirts. I’d used the one form of magic actually available to me: a spell to manipulate memories. It put her to sleep and robbed her of all the memories she had of me. *By the time she wakes up, she’ll be the same ol’ Hikari that she was before we met. And, by association, she’ll also forget the strange, traumatic experience of being assaulted by that crazy old exhibitionist.*

None of that would change the fact that all of those things had actually happened to her, of course, but there’s a reason why I made sure we only talked in person or via phone call. As long as I deleted my entries from her phone’s address book and call logs, there’d be no danger of a “wait, who’s this person in my phone?! I don’t remember adding him!” situation, and no stray text messages for me to potentially miss. Thanks to recent advances in phone technology, I just had to press her finger up to the phone’s sensor and it was unlocked, easy-peasy.

“Course,” I muttered to myself, “the sidekick excuse is getting pretty far-fetched at this point...” It felt like the moment I allowed myself to accept that fact, I’d lose the ability to lie to myself about it. It might’ve already been too late at that point.

I *refuse* to allow myself to become a protagonist. I have absolutely no intention of *ever* stepping into another leading role. I’ll never cause anyone else to suffer.

Never again.

A Meeting

“Mnh... Ugh...”

The very instant I opened my eyes, a bolt of piercing pain shot through me, and I let out an agonized moan. Strangely enough, it also felt like I was covered in something soft. I could sense somebody standing nearby, watching me. I opened my eyes.

“Oh, you’re awake?” A boy with vivid, crimson eyes was sitting beside me. His hair was silverish-white, his face was youthful and faintly freckled, and his smile was warm and affable. I could count all of my acquaintances using only my fingers, and I could confidently say that he wasn’t among them. “Feeling okay? Still alive?”

“I’m not exactly feeling great, but I’m alive, all right.”

“If you’re in good enough shape to pick my question apart, I’d say you’re doing just fine.” He sat down on a stool next to the bed I was resting in. “I’ll have you know, you seriously scared the *hell* outta me! You must’ve fallen all the way from the top of that cliff! You landed right in front of me! I was so sure you were dead that I was worried your spirit might haunt me.”

“I fell from a cliff...? Hmm.” I could dimly remember what had happened. The last thing I knew, I was midway through a pitched battle with a monster. We were indeed on the edge of a cliff at the time, overlooking the Witchmist Gorge, a valley known for its ever-present blanket of fog that enshrouded the bottom of the ravine. I’d been caught up in the monster’s desperate charge and was knocked right off the cliff.

I glanced out the cabin’s window but couldn’t see much of the outside at all on account of the thick fog. Considering that, I assumed I was still somewhere on the valley’s floor.

“Anyway,” the boy continued, “you look pretty young, huh? Lemme guess—twelve or so, right?”

I hesitated. “How’d you know?”

“Wait, I actually got it? Dang, I’m good!”

“Why are *you* surprised?”

“‘Cause *I’m* twelve!” He grinned proudly, elated to have run into a boy of his own age. That said, a secluded valley didn’t feel like an appropriate place for either of us to be, considering our age. “I live in a village just a little ways away from here. I’m doing some fieldwork, basically. I only use this cabin when I feel like taking a nap, so the place is yours for however long you need it. No monsters ’round these parts either, so you should be just fine here, as long as you can put up with the rock-hard bed.”

“It’s more than comfortable enough for me.”

“Whoa, seriously? You might be in for a shock if you ever end up sleeping at my house, in that case.” I stared blankly at the boy as he cackled. Same age or not, my expression stood in sharp contrast to his—I just couldn’t bring myself to smile, unfortunately. “Oh, sorry, guess I never introduced myself. Name’s Balrog. I’m just your everyday magic researcher.”

“My name is...Koh.” I chose to hide my identity as a Hero and introduced myself by name alone as I shook his hand. In that moment, *I* made my very first friend. It was a moment I would look back on more times than I could count.



Three days had passed since I took up residence in Balrog’s cabin. He would come by each day early in the morning, spend an hour or two on his so-called “research,” and then entertain himself by chatting with me.

“Aha ha ha ha ha! Man, Koh, you really are hilarious!”

“I don’t understand what’s so funny.” We never talked about anything particularly significant, and I more or less just reacted to the things that Balrog told me, but he cracked up in raucous laughter and told me how funny I was time after time regardless. Strangely enough, though, seeing him act that way didn’t bother me at all.

“Y’know,” he said, “the two of us might just be on the same wavelength. I’ve

never had a guy around my age to hang out with either, which probably makes a difference.”

“You haven’t?”

“Yeah, it’s a tiny village. The closest guy to my age is a decade older than me. There’s a girl my age, though, and another who’s just one year younger than me. It feels like I’m surrounded by girls more often than not.” Balrog let out a sardonic chuckle, but unfortunately, I couldn’t relate. My own social circle wasn’t big enough for me to understand his problems, and I wasn’t good at dealing with people to begin with.

The only people who I felt even remotely close to were my traveling companions. Elena the healer and Brad the spy *might’ve* been close to my age, but I didn’t know precisely how old either of them were. Brad was a man, so we had that in common, but throughout all of our travels, he and I had never actually had a proper conversation. I barely ever talked with Elena either—she always seemed a bit awkward and on edge around me.

In that sense, Balrog may have very well been the first person around my age that I had a decent conversation with too. The fact that he didn’t know I was a Hero helped a lot with that.

“You said you’re researching magic, right?” I casually asked. Balrog’s informal, friendly manner of talking had been making me self-conscious about my own clumsy and stiff manner of speech, and I was making an effort to work on that.

“Yeah. More precisely, I’m doing research into the fundamentals of magical tool development.”

“‘Magical tools’?”

“How much do you know about magic, Koh?”

“Not very much... I’ve been told I have an aptitude for it, but I’ve barely been able to actually use any.”

“Oh? That’d make you a specialist.”

“A ‘specialist’?”

“Well, that’s what I call ’em, anyway. Generally speaking, there’s two types of

mage: the ones who can use pretty much any spell they find written down in a book, and the ones who can only use one particular type of magic that's specific to them as individuals. I'm one of the former, if you were wondering."

Magic that's specific to me as an individual? In all likelihood, that meant that the one type of magic I could wield was the one I'd used to wipe my own memory. I hadn't used it even once since I became *myself*, of course.

"But the thing is," Balrog continued, "even if you lump both types of mages together, they say that only about twenty percent of the people in this country can use magic at all. And that's in spite of the fact that the magical arts are vital to the people's day-to-day lifestyles on a fundamental level!"

As a result, those who were born with the ability to use magic were granted an automatic ticket to a privileged life. It was a story I heard time and time again on my travels, like it or not. I'd had more than my fair share of troubles with the magical class, as well.

"That's why I want to make magical tools," he concluded. "I want to let the people who can't use magic have access to something close to that sort of power."

"That's a pretty admirable goal."

"You're giving me too much credit. It's not like I'm not planning on getting anything out of it. I wanna make a profit! I want people to respect me, and I wanna live a life of luxury!" Balrog looked a bit bashful as he lapsed into self-deprecation. I hadn't been trying to flatter him, though. I was genuinely impressed. After a moment of silence, he spoke up once more. "Hey, Koh. Would you mind meeting up with my sister some time?"

"Your sister?"

"Yeah. I told her a bit about you, and I guess she wants to meet you in person now. I was wondering if you'd want to come visit my village after you're all healed up?"

"The village you live in..." I was midway through my own Hero's journey. My companions would be worried about me after my sudden disappearance...maybe. Or maybe not, honestly. Our relationship had always

been a bit distant, and I'd never really had any problem with that. They might actually feel more comfortable without me around.

But even without taking all that into consideration, the simple fact of the matter was that I was intrigued by Balrog's village and his family. It wasn't an ominous, foreboding interest, either, but more of a sense of curiosity. The sensation welling up within me was new—I'd never taken an interest in anything like that before.

"All right, sounds good. I'll go."

"Really? You're sure?"

"Yeah. I can't exactly climb my way back to the top of that cliff." I stood up from the bed as I spoke, and Balrog's eyes widened.

"Whoa! Are you okay?!"

"I'm fine. No issues."

"You fell off a cliff! Barely three days ago! Didn't some of your bones break? I'm pretty sure they did!"

"I got better."

"You got...? Koh. Are you *sure* you're human?"

"As far as I'm aware." Though I healed substantially faster than the average person, thanks to my power as a Hero, falling off a cliff's a big deal. I wasn't *fully* recovered yet, but I could walk without any particular difficulty. If anything, staying cooped up in bed would be the bigger problem—I'd feel like I was losing my edge.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised, considering you survived a fall like that in the first place... Guess that settles it then. Wanna head out right away?"

"Don't you have research to do?"

"Yeah, but I can only actually work on the thing I'm doing now for a couple hours early in the morning. I make my observations, write up my findings, and then I'm basically free for the rest of the day." That left me with no particular reason to turn him down. I waited for Balrog to pack up his stuff, then set off, following him through the valley. I'd lost the majority of my own supplies, and

my sword had snapped just above the hilt. As a natural result, I was unusually unburdened.

“Should I carry some of your stuff, Balrog?”

“It’s not that heavy. You really think I’d shove my baggage off on an injured person?”

“I’d probably have an easier time with it than you. You’re built like a twig.”

“Ha ha, ouch! I guess you did say you’re a monster hunter, right?”

“Yeah.” I’d almost forgotten, but I’d said that was my line of work at one point while Balrog was telling me his life’s story. I figured that calling myself a “monster hunter” would raise fewer questions than if I went with “adventurer” or “bodyguard.” My physical aptitude was just about the only thing I could pride myself on, so it might’ve actually been a good fit for me.

“Guess that’d explain why you’re so confident,” Balrog replied with a mischievous grin. He looked like a problem child who’d just thought up a fabulous new prank. “In that case, I think I have a favor to ask after all, if you’re feeling up to it.”



We passed through a cave formed by a crack in the valley’s wall, emerging into a forest on the other side. Balrog’s village was apparently just beyond. As the trees thinned around us, we entered a vast area of cultivated land with a paved road running between the fields. Balrog had described his village as being in the middle of nowhere, but it seemed they still had a decent enough trade passing through to merit that sort of infrastructure.

“A peddler comes through every week to buy up all the crops and goods we produce here,” Balrog explained in a somewhat bored tone. “We make trips to a bigger city that’s nearby every once in a while, and I really do mean a *while*. As in, barely ever. Anyway, we’ve gotta do something about *that* before anything else. Where would she be around this time of day...? Ah, found her! Heeey, Lyra!”

Balrog shouted out into the field, and one of the villagers working it glanced up at us. She was a red-haired girl who looked to be about the same age as we

were. “Huh? You’re back early today, Balrog... *Kyaaaahhhhhhhh?!?”*



She shrieked so loudly, I thought it might burst my eardrums. I would've covered my ears, but my hands were both occupied at the time, so I just had to suffer through it. Balrog, meanwhile, already had his plugged up.

"A-A-A boar! A *huge* boar! Why's it *here*?!" The other villagers who were working the field turned around to see what she was shouting about. Balrog, meanwhile, was clutching his stomach and convulsing with laughter.

"Hey, Balrog," I said in a questioning tone, "what's going on here? This doesn't feel right."

"Aha ha ha ha ha! Nah, this is exactly what I was going for! That reaction was *perfect*, seriously!"

"Are you crazy, Balrog?!" shouted the girl. "This is no time to be laughing—that thing's dangerous! Get away from it! It's gonna eat you!"

"It's fine, Lyra! Take a closer look!"

"Huh...?" The girl Balrog called Lyra squinted, training her eyes (which I happened to notice were also red) on the massive boar...and finally picking out the fact that I was carrying it. It was over two meters long from end to end, and I'd barely been visible beneath its bulk. "Is that a person...?"

"Yeah, and he took out the boar that's been making a mess of the forest lately! You should've seen it! He was incredible!"

"He did...? Umm, wait, who is he?"

"This is Koh! Y'know, the guy I told you about before?"

"Oh, right! Of course... Ah, I'm Lyra. You can set that thing down for now if you want."

"Sure." I walked over to an unused patch of ground and dropped the boar. The massive thud it made as it impacted the ground was loud enough that Lyra and Balrog both jumped in surprise.

Rei

“Seriously, that was hysterical!”

“It was *not*! I really thought that thing was going to eat you!” Balrog cackled for reasons known only to him while Lyra complained indignantly about his behavior. I assumed that she was one of the very few villagers close to his age that he’d told me about before.

The boar, incidentally, was the favor Balrog had asked me for. I took care of it while we were on our way to the village. From what he told me, it had arrived in the area recently and was rampaging through the woods, posing a real threat to the locals. By my standards, it was just a wild animal—not even close to what I’d call a monster. Finishing it off barehanded wasn’t even a challenge.

The mayor’s house was apparently the only one big enough to butcher it in, and it took several of the village men to carry it off. I would’ve done it myself if they’d just asked me.

“Really, though,” Lyra said, “you’re even crazier than I heard!”

“Why, what have you heard about me?”

“That you fell all the way from the top of the valley and survived, for one thing! You can’t even see up there with all the fog. I assumed it was just another of Balrog’s tall tales, but I guess he might not’ve been exaggerating that much after all.”

“You thought I was lying? You’re terrible, Lyra! It’s all true—right, Koh?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you mean, ‘yeah’? Falling off a cliff and killing a boar with your bare hands isn’t something you should be that nonchalant about!” Lyra heaved a deep sigh. Apparently, I’d exasperated her somehow. Given they had the boar to deal with, the village folk ended the day’s farmwork early. Freed from the fields, she was accompanying us to Balrog’s house to meet with his sister.

“I should probably say this in advance,” said Balrog. “Rei—my sister, I mean—is blind. She was born that way.”

“She’s blind...?”

“So try not to freak her out like you did Lyra and the others, okay?”

“Don’t even *try* to pretend that wasn’t your fault!” Lyra smacked Balrog upside the head. I only had an outsider’s perspective, and a brief one at that, but the two of them struck me as really close to each other. I was just a little jealous of their rapport.

We arrived at our destination—a fairly small, one-story house made of wood. Balrog told us to wait for a moment and went inside on his own.

“So this is Balrog’s home?” I mused.

“That’s right. He and Rei live here together.”

“Do they have any other family?”

“He didn’t tell you? No, it’s just the two of them.”

“Hmm.” It was hardly surprising—losing your parents was far from uncommon in the age we lived in. My own parents were alive, or so I was told, but I’d never so much as seen their faces, so I felt like I was in a somewhat similar boat.

“It kind of feels like everyone in this tiny town is one big family, though,” she continued. “I eat dinner with the two of them most of the time too. Well, more like all the time, really,” she amended with a smile.

“The two of you must get along well.”

“It’s nothing special. My parents are both still around, so I have it easy. Only makes sense for me to use that spare time to help them out, right?”

“Maybe, if you’re a really generous person.”

“Okay, really, why all the praise? Are you trying to woo me?”

“No.”

“I guess that figures. By the way, do you *ever* make any other expressions?”

That glower of yours could send wild animals running for the hills.” I prodded my cheek with a finger. She had a point—I didn’t have an expressive face by any stretch of the imagination. It was like my facial muscles were paralyzed. “But I can tell you’re not a bad guy. I sorta get why Balrog’s trying to get you and Rei to meet up.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, nothing much. Just a feeling I get. I’m not doing any deep thinking about it—sometimes it’s important to just follow your gut! Helps keep your mind from getting all bogged down with worries and stuff.” She smiled proudly. I wasn’t sure what it was she thought she understood about me, but if she was happy, I didn’t particularly see a problem with it. It was better than her being on guard around me, at the very least.

“Oh? Have I caught you two opening up to each other?” Balrog emerged from the house with such convenient timing, I wondered if he’d done it on purpose.

“Yup,” replied Lyra. “Turns out he’s a lot dumber than I thought he’d be, so that’s a relief!”

“Wow, talk about rude! At least say he’s purehearted!”

“Maybe I could say he’s an airhead?”

“That, or you could cut to the chase and say he’s dumb... Wait, now we’re back to the start! That was way too quick, Koh!”

“Why’re you snapping at *me* about it...?” I couldn’t keep up with the pace of the conversation at all, but I was somewhat surprised to find that I didn’t mind the less-than-polite way they were treating me. I felt a lot more comfortable with it than I did with the special treatment people *usually* gave me, knowing that I was a Hero.

“Well, let’s just say everyone has their own perspective on what sorta guy he is and leave it at that. You ready, Koh? Let’s head inside.”

“Sure.” I followed Balrog into his house. It looked as unremarkable on the inside as it did from the outside, though I did take note of the fact that they had very little in the way of clutter.

“Quiet,” he whispered, pressing a finger to his mouth. I held my breath as he led me to a particular room. He stopped for just a moment, turning around to glance at me, then slowly and carefully pushed the door open.

Peeking past him, I saw a girl seated inside, her back turned to the door. She had the same silvery-white hair as Balrog, which shimmered brilliantly in a beam of light that fell through the nearby window. She looked dainty and slender, so frail that part of me worried she might shatter at the slightest touch.

I spent a moment staring at her before Balrog gave my shoulder a gentle push. I assumed that meant he wanted me to go inside, so I walked past him, approaching her as quietly as I could manage. As I got closer, I finally saw what she was so focused on: a book with pure-white pages. She was tracing her finger across them.

Walking up to her was all well and good, but then I hesitated, not sure what I should do next. After a moment of careful thought, I slowly reached out and took her hand in mine as gently as possible. She twitched ever so slightly with surprise. Her hand felt so delicate, I was afraid that I would crush it if I squeezed it with even the slightest bit of force.

“Huh...? Ah, wh-who are you?” Her lips quivered slightly. I wasn’t so much holding her hand as resting mine on it, so she was easily able to pull away from me.

“Ahh, you figured it out already?”

“Balrog?” The sound of his voice confused her further.

“Koh’s hands are all rough and rugged—of course you’d realize he’s not me. Mine’re silky-smooth, after all.”

“Koh...? Does, umm, does that mean...?” she murmured, almost in a daze, and reached her hand out once more, searching around for mine. When she found it, she gripped it gently. “Are you *that* Koh...?”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “‘That’?”

“Didn’t I mention that I told my sister about you? Seems she took a liking to you from all those stories. Consider this my birthday present for you, Rei!”

“It’s your birthday?” I asked, turning back to her.

“No, not for quite a while longer...”

“You being born is worth celebrating *every day of the year*, in my book!” Balrog declared in an over-the-top, pompous tone. Rei smiled at his antics, still holding on to my hand.

Taking a closer look at her, I could clearly tell that she and Balrog were related. It wasn’t just her pure-white hair—her facial features were also striking in a way that resembled his. She timidly turned her face upward and, after a moment of hesitation, began to slowly speak once more.

“I, umm... My name is Rei. I heard about you from my brother, and, umm...”

“I’m Koh. I heard about you from your brother.”

“Koh? You know that’s exactly what she *just* told you, right?”

“Well, what else am I supposed to say?”

Balrog shrugged with exasperation. Rei, meanwhile, let a chuckle slip out at our exchange.

“Hee hee! You certainly are a funny person, Koh.”

“Right? It’s even better ’cause he doesn’t even know he’s doing it.” I was having a hard time following the conversation again, and I felt a little bit out of place. Balrog continued. “So hey, I was thinking I’d go show Koh around the village.”

“Can... Can I come?”

“Had a feeling you’d say that. ’Course you can!”

“Are you sure?” I asked, a bit apprehensively. My question was loaded with the implicit qualifier: would she be all right, in spite of her blindness? Rei immediately dispelled my worries, though.

“I’ll be okay. I can get around well enough—I even go shopping on my own, sometimes.”

“You do?”

“I’ve lived in this village since I was born, and everyone here treats me very

well.” I couldn’t think of any reason to turn her down after that.

She’d almost made it sound like her condition didn’t bother her at all, but of course, there were still some dangers inherent to walking around outside when you can’t see a thing. I quickly learned that, at Balrog’s request, she usually got around in a wooden wheelchair that he’d apparently made himself.

“But we’ve got Koh with us today, so we should be fine without, right?”

“Hmm? Oh, okay, I get it.” Taking a guess at Balrog’s intent, I slipped one arm under Rei’s knees, supported her back with the other, and lifted her into the air.

“Hyaah?!” Rei shouted in surprise. Balrog whistled, clearly amused.

“Is this not what you meant?”

“Nah, I thought you’d lead her around by the hand, but this is just fine in its own way! Heck, this is even better!”

“By the hand...? That does make sense, actually. Sorry, Rei.”

“N-No, it’s all right! I wouldn’t mind staying like this at all...” Her pale skin made her faint blush all the more apparent. I took that to mean she didn’t mind and carried her out of the house. Barely a few steps later, though, she changed her mind, and I ended up setting her down after all.

The Everyday

The first month after I took up residence in Balrog's village passed by in a flash. It was the most calm and tranquil period I'd ever experienced, and all it took was abandoning my duties as a Hero.

"Is something wrong, Koh?"

"Ah, no, nothing." I'd stopped in my tracks without realizing it. Rei turned to face me from her wheelchair. I gave her a pat on the head to deflect my moment of distraction.

"Ahh..." Rei smiled and visibly relaxed. I'd learned over the course of the past month that she really liked having her head patted like that. Making somebody else happy was honestly really new to me, and I still wasn't used to that idea.

I'd done a fair bit of helping out since I'd arrived, mostly with manual labor. Word about the boar I took down spread among the townsfolk overnight, and it wasn't long at all before they started asking me to help carry around crops and materials or drive away wild animals that were threatening the fields. It felt like I was making myself useful, but I wasn't occupied *all* the time. Not by a long shot. When I wasn't busy helping people with their requests, I spent my time in a slow, leisurely manner—and I spent most of it with her.

"Sorry you're stuck with someone like me all the time, Rei. I'm sure you must be bored."

"*Really*, Koh? Have I ever said *anything* of the sort?" Rei puffed out her cheeks, making a big show of sulking. She was rather prone to somewhat childish mannerisms like that. "I'll admit that you might not be a very good conversationalist, but that doesn't keep you from trying your hardest to talk with me anyway! It's really kind of you, and I appreciate it."

"You're giving me too much credit."

"But that's not all! Thanks to you taking care of me, my brother and Lyra have been spending a lot more time together recently." She tilted her head up

towards me again, smiling happily.

“What, are they in love?”

“Huh? You haven’t noticed?!”

“I asked a while back, but they denied it.”

Rei paused for a moment. “I’m certain that’s my fault.”

“Yours? Why?”

“Balrog’s always taken really good care of me, but all that time he spends on me is time he can’t spend on himself. Lyra’s always been considerate of our circumstances too—I have an inkling that she’s worried about stealing him away from me.”

“Have they ever said anything like that?”

“They didn’t have to. I can just tell.” Rei hung her head. Most likely, her lack of vision made it easier for her to discern people’s intent and emotions by other means—be it the words they chose or the way they said them.

“That makes sense...”

“But now it’s different! You’re here now, Koh!”

I hesitated. “But I’ve never had a family. I don’t really think I can do a good enough job to take your brother’s place.”

“‘*Take his place*’...? Koh, has anyone ever told you that you’re a bit dull?”

“No. Most people tell me I’m quite sharp, if anything.”

“Oh, you liar!” I wasn’t lying, though—or at least not intentionally. I was under the impression that I was quite sensitive when it came to stuff like detecting the presence of monsters in the vicinity. Rei started up her usual little sulking routine again, though a moment later, an idea seemed to hit her, and she hung her head once more. “Koh... Do you enjoy spending time with me like this?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t even have to think about it?!”

“People tell me that I’m so expressionless, it’s like I don’t have emotions at all, so this might be hard to believe, but I do know how it feels to enjoy something. I’m pretty sure that’s how I feel when I’m with you.”

“W-Well, now I feel all shy...” She hung her head yet again, but this time, she was blushing. She was precisely my opposite, in that respect. Every thought that went through her head showed instantly on her face.

It’s been said that it’s normal to have complicated feelings of admiration and jealousy towards people who have what you don’t, but I’d certainly never experienced any jealousy when I was with Rei. She made me feel calm and relaxed, if anything. Plus, the fact that she couldn’t see my expressions meant that she wasn’t bothered by the fact that I barely had any.

“I wish I could live like this forever,” I mumbled.

“Koh?”

“I was just thinking about how nice it’d be to live without any messy, complicated stuff to worry about. With Balrog, and Lyra, and you... Ah, we’re here.” Rei didn’t seem to have said all that she wanted to yet, but the walk from Balrog’s house to the village’s main gateway only took about ten minutes. I could only stretch it out for so long.

“Oh, hey, Koh!” shouted Balrog with a wave. “Thanks for walking Rei all the way out here.”

“Wait, you’re here?” I replied, confused. “But then, why did you leave Rei at the house...?”

“Oh, no—you’re serious, aren’t you?” interjected Lyra. “Sounds like Rei has it pretty rough...”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” For reasons I couldn’t fathom, Balrog and Rei both sighed. I was under the impression that *I* was the one who should’ve been exasperated, but it seemed I was misreading something. Right around the end of that brief exchange, I felt a tug on my sleeve.

“What is it, Rei?”

“Whoops, looks like we’re getting in the way. Let’s move along, Balrog,” said

Lyra.

“Oh, the tragedy! I knew the day would come that my beloved little sister would treat me with indifference, but alas, now that the time has arrived I find my heart unprepared and broken!” Balrog collapsed dramatically onto Lyra’s shoulder, and I watched the two of them walk away until Rei tugged on my sleeve once more.

“Come on, Koh! Are you really going to ruin a rare chance for some privacy?”

“Yeah, you’re right. Shouldn’t be nosy—I definitely don’t want to bother them.”

She sighed. “Yes, I suppose you wouldn’t. Shall we head out as well?”

“Y-Yeah, sure.” Her reaction struck me as sort of weirdly unenthusiastic, but I moved on anyway, pushing her wheelchair towards the peddler’s wagon that was set up by the village’s entryway.

“Oh, Rei! Good to see you,” called the peddler. “And... Actually,” he started, looking me up and down, “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“It’s been a while, yes,” replied Rei. “He only arrived recently, but he’s staying in our village for now.”

“Hmm, that so?” The peddler made no effort to pry into Rei’s rather evasive answer and replied with a smile. “You’re a real go-getter, huh, Rei? With company like him around, I guess you won’t be wanting *this* anymore?”

He pulled a book out from his carriage. Its cover was decorated with an illustration of a handsome knight and a woman wearing an apron. It didn’t have a title written on it, as far as I could see, but I surmised that it was an item she’d requested the peddler to find for her.

“O-Of course I do!”

“Ha ha ha, I’m just messin’ with you! You already paid for the thing, and I’m not in the business of cheatin’ my customers.” In contrast to his teasing, he was very gentle about setting the book down on her lap.

No sooner had we wrapped up our conversation and walked away than another villager strolled over to talk with him.

“Looks like he’s pretty popular around here,” I observed.

“Not many of the villagers here have to leave for work often, so he’s our only real means of bringing in things from the outside world.”

“So that book you got came from outside?”

“That’s right.” She opened the book up to show me, but its pages were perfectly plain and white. There wasn’t so much as a single word printed upon them. When the light hit them just right, though, I could see tiny bumps protruding from the paper’s surface.

“Oh, is that braille?”

“It is! I’m surprised you know about it.”

“I know it exists, anyway. This is my first time seeing it in person. I definitely can’t read it.”

“Hee hee! You’re a little mysterious, Koh.”

“I am?”

“From what I understand, braille’s incredibly rare! My brother’s the one who learned that there’s a form of writing that lets people like me read stories on their own, but there was no hope of finding a book written in braille anywhere near here. He had to ask the local peddler to keep an eye out for them in his travels.” She ran her finger across the first page. I could imagine the book’s story flowing into her mind with that single motion.

“To me, these books are the world.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve never been able to see. Not the beautiful flowers, not the clouds that float up in the blue sky, and not people... My brother and Lyra talk about the boar you caught sometimes, but I couldn’t see that either. But books are different... Their worlds are made up of words alone. I can enjoy them, just like a normal person. So, for me...”

Rei paused and smiled sadly, her words seemingly caught up inside her. Seeing her make that expression brought about yet another feeling I couldn’t quite explain—a painful, aching sensation somewhere within my chest.

“This story’s about a perfectly ordinary girl who falls in love with a valiant knight.” Rei began to speak once more. Maybe my silence made her feel uncomfortable. The content of the book was more or less exactly what I’d imagined, judging by the illustration on the cover. But Rei, of course, couldn’t see it.

“The girl thought of the village she grew up in as a cage, and herself as a bird trapped inside it. Ever since she was born, she saw the exact same sights, day after day, year after year. One day, the knight appeared before her by pure coincidence and took her with him into the outside world. That was how the previous volume went. This one’s supposed to continue the story and tell the tale of the adventures they have in the world he opened up for her.”

“You must be really excited to read about them.”

“I am! But, it also makes me feel wistful... That’s not a feeling I’ll ever be able to experience for myself.”

“Rei...” She hardly needed to say how it made her feel. Her tone of voice and her pained, almost tearful expression as she clutched the book to her chest made it all too clear. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her.

Rei was a lovely girl. She was bright, cheerful, kind, and considerate to a fault...or at least that’s what Balrog repeatedly told me. In all honesty, I didn’t really have any standard by which to judge that sort of thing myself. That said, I also didn’t have any reason to disagree with him.

I wanted her to be happy. I’d barely spent any time with her at all, and yet I felt exactly the same as Balrog and Lyra. For all we knew, maybe a day would come when a dashing knight would arrive in the village and escort her into the outside world. Something about her made it feel possible. Surely that sort of happiness was waiting for her, someday in the future...

“Hey, Rei? Do you want to go out and explore the outside world with me one day?”

“Huh...?”

“Your world might still be pitch black, even after you leave this village, but... That’s why I’ll be there with you—I’ll see everything in your place, and I’ll tell

you all about it. I'll be your eyes."

"You'll be...my eyes...?" Frankly, my mouth was moving faster than my mind was. I only realized what I'd said after it had already popped out, and part of me had to wonder what on *earth* I was thinking.

I'd always thought that all I was capable of was swinging a sword and slaying my foes, nothing more, nothing less. But I hadn't so much as touched a sword since I arrived in the village. There was more to my life there than manual labor—I had Rei, Balrog, and Lyra there with me. I didn't need a special reason or excuse to spend time with them. I could live for something *other* than killing.

And if I didn't have to live for war, I wanted to live for the sake of the girl who taught me that I could be *more*. Even if I did have to take up my sword and return to the battlefield someday, the fighting couldn't last forever. And when it was over...

"I want to stay with you, Rei. You and everyone else." I crouched down in front of her and took her hand in mine. The book she'd been holding plopped down on her lap, but she hardly seemed to notice. Even with her eyes closed, it felt like she was *looking* at me in stunned silence.

"What do you mean, 'everyone else'? I think you just made my heart skip a beat!" She sounded a bit pouty, but her smile told a different story.

"M-My bad."

"But it's just like you to say it like that... It really did set my heart aflutter." Rei stood up from her wheelchair just a bit too quickly. With nothing to support her, she teetered forward, almost losing her balance, but I caught her before she could fall.

"When I said that I can't see anything...I might've been lying, just a little."

"Lying?"

"I can't explain how, Koh, but I just...see you, somehow. Even if I don't know what you look like, I know that you're here for me. I can feel your warmth." She leaned forward, resting her face upon my chest. Her voice quivered as she poured her heart out, stringing her feelings together as carefully as she could, word by word. As each word seeped into me, they grew, kindling a warmth I

could feel spreading throughout my very being.

“Koh, you’re my light.”

Me? Her “light”...?

“I love you, Koh.”

“Huh?”

“Even if I’ve only known you for a month, even if we’ve barely had any time to talk...I still love you.”

I knew what she meant. The love she spoke of was the same “love” depicted in the book she’d left resting atop her wheelchair.

I didn’t understand “love.” I knew that there are all sorts of forms of love—love for your friends, romantic love, familial love...too many to count, and I couldn’t for the life of me explain what the differences between all of them were. I was born without that intuitive understanding.

That’s why I didn’t know whether I could live up to the “love” that Rei had conveyed to me. The right words just wouldn’t come to me, and the very few that did stuck in my throat. I couldn’t spit them out.

But even so, the seeds that had been sown in my heart since I arrived in the village were beginning to sprout. They were growing, slowly but surely, and I was growing right along with them. Gradually, they were teaching me what it means to be human.

Before I realized what I was doing, I’d embraced her. Whether that was a deep-seated fragment of knowledge or reflex left over from the *me* who’d been erased, or an impulse prompted by whatever was growing inside me, I couldn’t say. And in that moment, I didn’t need to know. I knew I’d understand someday. As long as I could be with Balrog and Lyra... As long as I could be with Rei... I knew I would come to realize what the emotions budding within me were called.

I was sure of it.

Ruin

“Thanks again, Koh.”

“It’s fine, really. Don’t worry about it.” That day, I’d woken up early in the morning to accompany Balrog to the valley. From what he’d told me, some of the ores he’d been observing had been exhibiting a particularly unusual reaction recently. He wanted to test if that reaction would continue if he moved them from the mana-rich environment of the valley to somewhere closer to his village. “You’re sure it’s safe?”

“For now, anyway. There aren’t any absolutes in research like this, but think about it—if I made magical tools with these things and they ended up only working in places with dense concentrations of mana in the atmosphere, they’d be totally worthless, right? You can’t make progress without taking a few risks in the process!”

“So, does that mean these ores are sort of like magical batteries?”

“‘Batteries’?” He cocked his head.

“Ah... I mean, like fuel? You know, magical firewood?”

“Oh, okay, then yeah. That’s basically right.”

Knowing about all these things I’ve never actually seen’s a real pain sometimes... I grumbled internally as I piled the research equipment Balrog had left in the valley onto the small, hand-drawn cart we’d brought from the village. Since he claimed the ore wasn’t *that* dangerous, I put a few chunks of it in as well.

“By the way, Koh—how long’s it gonna be before you start calling me your brother-in-law?”

“My brother-in-*what*?”

“Isn’t that the direction you and Rei are headed in?”

“The direction we’re...? Oh, *this* again?” Balrog cracked a grin—he was clearly

immensely entertained. News of my exchange with Rei on that day had spread through the village like wildfire. There was absolutely no hope of hiding it. Ever since then, Balrog had used the incident as an excuse to tease me relentlessly. “Like you’re one to talk. What about you and Lyra?”

“Ugh! Finally punching back, huh?!”

“Letting myself get beat up one-sidedly goes against my principles. So, how about it?”

“L-Lyra and I really aren’t like that...”

“Oh? Then I guess you wouldn’t mind if I told her you said that?”

“Don’t! She’ll scold me half to death!”

“Meaning you really *are* ‘like that’ after all.” His reaction was as over-the-top as ever, but watching him fly into a fluster still brought a smile to my lips. Balrog responded with one of his own, albeit a fairly exasperated one.

“Can’t you do something about that smile of yours? You look like you’re plotting a murder.”

“I’m not doing it on purpose. This is just how I am.”

“Not true! You have a totally natural smile when you’re with Rei! Just gimme one of *those* every once in a while!”

A totally natural smile. Those words made me freeze up for a moment. It was the first time I’d been told anything like that. “All these weird expectations of yours are just making me nervous.”

Did I really smile naturally when I was with her? She’d obviously never been able to see it and point it out herself, but she certainly smiled back at me every once in a while. A tender, affectionate smile...

“Ah! You were just thinking about Rei, weren’t you?”

“What?”

“You were smiling just now! A really good one too! Downright angelic compared to what you give *us*!”

“You’re reading too much into this.”

“Yeah, *sure* I am. You don’t have to hide it! Looks like you’ll be calling me your big brother before too long after all! Don’tcha think you’d better start getting used to it before it happens for real?”

“Don’t need it. For one thing, we’re not even close to old enough to think about that stuff.”

“Oooh, so you’ve given it enough thought to consider your age? That’s some real progress, there! It’s fine, though. Haven’t you ever heard of common-law marriage? And hell, I could always clear out of the house, if you want! It’ll be agonizing to leave my beloved little sister behind, but I know she’ll be in good hands with you!”

“You’re impossible.” Balrog was positively frolicking, and I heaved a sigh as I finished loading up the cart and set off. I wouldn’t be able to escape his teasing that easily, of course. The cart wasn’t especially heavy, but a lot of his equipment was delicate, and I had no choice but to move slowly. He, on the other hand, was empty-handed. “Hey, Balrog?”

“What is it? You sound pretty serious.”

I hesitated. “Actually, never mind.”

“C’mon, again? How many times does this make? You’re always right on the verge of telling me something, then you shut up at the last second. Do you have *any* idea how curious you’re making me?”

“I just get really nervous whenever I try to spit it out.”

“You can get *nervous*?! But that means—you have *feelings*, Koh?!”

“...Hey.”

“Kidding, kidding. Trust me, I know that you’re way more sensitive than you look.” The good-natured mockery abruptly vanished from Balrog’s tone as he smiled at me. His smile was incredibly similar to Rei’s, and yet somehow, it didn’t prompt the same emotions I felt towards her. “Just talk to me, okay? I’m probably the easiest person around to talk to about this stuff, right? Times like these are exactly what guy friends are for!”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“Same goes for *brothers* who’re close to your age, by the way!”

“Oh, cut it out. To me, Rei is...” I was about to try to explain what she meant to me, but I couldn’t. I didn’t even understand my feelings for her clearly, so I didn’t really have anything to say. “Balrog?”

“Hmm?”

“This village really—”

I couldn’t finish my sentence again, but this time, it wasn’t my fault. I was interrupted by a noise in the distance. An explosion.

“Wha— Balrog!”

“That came from the village!”

Nothing like this had happened here before—the situation was plainly abnormal. We sprinted for town, abandoning the cart without a second thought.



“No... This can’t be happening...”

The village was ablaze. Gouts of flame spilled from countless homes, and many of the buildings had already collapsed. Corpses littered the ground, charred beyond all hope of recognition.

“Rei!”

I had a terrible premonition. The flames were working their way outward from the center of the village. What if Rei had been left behind in her house? Rei, who couldn’t see, and couldn’t escape on her own? I sprinted through the town, as if running as fast as I could would shake off the horrifying visions racing through my imagination.

“Ah...”

Rei’s house had not been spared. It was in a fiery blaze of smoke and ash.

“REEEEIIIIIIII!”

I hurled myself into the inferno before I even knew what I was doing. Their entire house and almost everything in it was made of wood—a perfect

collection of fuel to stoke the flames. It was only a matter of time before it collapsed, and there was no concrete reason to believe I'd find her inside, but I desperately searched anyway. The rooms that were so familiar to me were now blackened and warped by fire, completely unrecognizable.

"She's not here...?" I muttered to myself. There was no sign of her within, dead or alive, but I *did* find a pile of charcoal and ash I could barely identify as the remains of her wheelchair. In other words, if she had escaped from her house, she'd done so on foot.

"Rei... Rei! Can you hear me?! Where are you?!" I dashed out of the house and shouted at the top of my lungs. She couldn't have possibly gone far, and there was no guarantee she'd be safe if she was still in the village. I had to find her and save her as quickly as possible.

"Do you wanna know?" An odd, discomforting voice rang out. It was quiet, muffled, and strangely rough.

"What?!"

"Here's a hint—she's right over that way."

"Who the hell are you?!"

"Good question, but are you sure you have time to hear the answer?"

"Shit!" The voice was mocking me, whatever it was, but I couldn't let my frustration get the better of me. I ran off in the direction it pointed me in. I didn't have any other hints to guide me, after all.

"Ah... *Rei!*"

And there she was. She lay on the ground, as-of-yet unscorched.

"Koh..."

"Rei! Are you...okay...?" She hadn't been burned, but as I knelt beside her, I immediately knew she was far from all right. A chunk of metal was buried in her back. Blood poured from the wound, and what little color and vitality she'd had in her pale skin was draining away before my eyes.

"Koh... I can hear you... Koh..."

“Rei! *REI!*” I lifted her in my arms and grasped her hand. She gave mine a feeble squeeze in return.



“Koh... It’s you... I knew it... I don’t have...to see you... I can feel...your light...”

“Stop... Rei, stop talking! If you keep talking, you’ll...”

Die. I couldn’t say it. The word just wouldn’t come out. I could tell how much blood she’d lost. I knew it was too late to save her, but I couldn’t bring myself to accept it.

“How? How did this happen?! Why?!”

“Don’t cry...Koh...” I hadn’t even realized I *was* crying. She reached up to my face, wiping the tears from my cheek. Her hand was so cold it made me shiver—cold as ice.

“I’m so...lucky...”

“Wh-What? Why...?”

“Because...I can pass on...in the arms...of the boy...I love...” With each word, her breathing grew more and more shallow. What little strength she had left was quickly leaving her.

“Rei...no, *don’t!* Don’t go! *Rei!*”

“Koh, please...care of...brother...”

Her hand fell from my cheek. I knew in an instant—she was gone.

“AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Her face blurred as my tears overflowed. A mess of emotions surged within me, spilling out in an anguished wail. I screamed so loudly my throat felt like it was being torn to shreds. She would never return to me. Never again would I hear her soft, gentle voice. Never again would I feel her warmth. That truth burned its way into me, and screaming was all I could do to release it.

“Oooh, look at you! Poor, pitiful Koh!” The voice returned. “If *anyone* deserves pity here, it’s the girl for sure. Or maybe *all* the villagers? They had no idea who or what you are, and they took you in anyway. They messed up big time.”

“What’s that...supposed to mean...?”

“It means this whole tragedy happened because of *you.*” A new voice rang out

—and this time, it was a voice I knew. It was a man I'd seen and spoken with many times before: the mayor's son. But something was *wrong* about him.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Oh? I was sure you'd come out swinging. You're a lot more calm about this than I expected." The mayor's son wouldn't talk like that. He wouldn't go out of his way to provoke me. He was a quiet man who always struck me as lacking in self-confidence.

"*This* guy's the one who set the village on fire! He killed allll the folks who were running around outside too, and threw 'em right onto the pyre!" A hazy, black fog manifested behind him. I'd seen it before. It was the monster that I'd been facing the moment I was reborn as my current self.

"He always cursed his fate, see. He *hated* the fact that he'd never get to leave his village! He *hated* that when his daddy died he'd have to take over as mayor and live in this tiny little hellhole until he kicked the bucket! Oooh, he was so sad! I just couldn't *bear* to watch him, so I gave him a bit of advice: if he hated this village so much, *he could just tear it all down!* And the second that darkness was seeded in his heart, he was all mine. Mine to control, mine to *dominate!* All that was left was to wait for you to leave and set a couple fires! And I did it all for you, Kunughi Koh—all to drive *you* to despair!"

He destroyed the village to get to me. This only happened because I was here...

"I knew you'd taken a real shine to that girl of yours. So y'know what I did? I told her everything! I told her that this was all *your* fault! Went out of the way to make sure she didn't get burned up, just to give her the chance to curse your name at the very end...but wow, did she ever mess *that* up!"

"You killed Rei... You killed everyone...just to make me suffer...?"

"I sure did. All to get revenge against you for making a fool of me. But it's not enough yet! Not even *close!* I need more, more, *more!* I won't be satisfied till I drive you into the deepest pit of despair that hell has to offer! I'll *crush* your spirit as many times as it takes! I'll use anyone and everyone around you to *make you suffer!*"

If disaster only befell the village because I was here...then does that mean that if I'd never turned up, nobody would've had to die? Rei wouldn't have had to die...?

"I ruined...everything... It's all...my fault..." I felt myself go limp. All my rage towards the creature drained away, replaced by a lifeless void. Coming to this village and meeting Balrog, Lyra, and Rei had changed me. It let me finally become *myself*, not just a Hero. But *this* is how it ended. I was wrong to hope for happiness. I was wrong to hope for a peaceful future.

"Koh...? And...is that you, Fred...?"

"Balrog...?" I barely noticed him arrive. His already-pale complexion was a shade lighter than usual, and his eyes looked somewhat out of focus.

"I can't find Lyra and Rei, Koh. I've looked everywhere, but I just can't find them..."

"Oh, Lyra? She turned to ashes a long time ago." The dark cloud didn't say it directly—it spoke through Fred, the mayor's son who it had possessed. Balrog let out a wordless, horrified gasp. "She was lucky enough to be outside when the fire started, so I had to finish her off myself... With my own...two...hands..."

Up until that moment, Fred's possession had left his expression blank and emotionless. But as he spoke, that began to change. A horrible fear was beginning to come over him. "No... No, this is wrong! I never wanted th—"

At almost the same instant he regained his sanity, he was silenced forever. His head fell to the ground with a wet thud, his body following shortly thereafter. Balrog gasped wildly for breath, his hand still raised, palm pointed at Fred's corpse.

"B-Balrog...? What...? Why...?" A madness lurked within his eyes, and an orb of condensed wind so twisted and powerful it warped the scenery around it hovered in front of his outstretched hand. I knew immediately what had happened. Balrog had used his magic, the power he'd dreamed would bring himself and his family a life of plenty, to slice Fred's neck.

"B-But," he stammered. "He... He killed Lyra... Koh...? Koh, is that... Is that Rei...?"

“Ah...”

“Rei...? Koh, why isn’t she—” *Moving*. I knew what he was trying to ask, but he never got the chance to finish. The moment he realized that Rei was dead, the darkness that was enshrouding Fred’s corpse surged through the air, engulfing him.

“*BWA HA HA HA HA HA!* This is just *perfect!*”

“Balrog?! What did you *do* to him?!”

“This kid’s your best friend, right? Then I think he deserves to know the truth too! It’s all *Koh’s* fault—all of this happened because of him! Don’t you hate him, Balrog? Don’t you just wanna kill him?! *He’s* why Lyra and Rei are dead! Kunughi Koh’s the one who destroyed your everything!”

“Koh...destroyed...? N-No, that’s not true...”

“*What?*” said the creature, its tone steeped in derisive mockery.

“Koh’s...my best friend... He’d never...hurt them!”

“Balrog...”

“Ugh, *friendship*, I swear. What an absolute bore—here I was, thinking I’d get to enjoy watching you be killed by your own best friend.” The creature seemed fed up with us, but it wasn’t finished. “Oh, but in that case...I just had an *excellent* idea.”

It grinned. It didn’t have a face, but I could tell from its voice alone that it was grinning, and the sheer cruelty of its joy sent a chill down my spine.

“Ah... Ugh?!”

“Balrog?! What’s wrong?!”

“You realize this kid’s my vessel now, right? Heh, and looks like he’s a real prodigy too! He’s just *brimming* with magic and potential... Normally, that’s all there’d be to him—wasted potential. But that’s where *I* come in! I just have to give him a liiittle push in the right direction—give him the help he needs to *really* cut loose... I think this’ll be a real improvement, don’t you?”

“Wh-What’re you talking about...?”

“Or maybe I’ll mix myself in there for good measure! That’ll be the end for *me* as I am now, sure...but then I won’t even have to manipulate him. He’ll lose all sense of reason and lash out against humanity itself! I’ll make him into a monster to rule all monsters! An Archfiend, worthy of vanquishing a true Hero!”

Balrog...an Archfiend...?

“The girl you loved is *dead* thanks to you, and your best friend’s your worst enemy! How’s *that* for revenge?!”

“Shut the hell up! Rei and Balrog aren’t your goddamn playthings!”

“You’re right about that.” The darkness swelled around Balrog, engulfing him entirely. “They were just unlucky. They would’ve been just fine if they’d never met *you*.”

And with that, the creature vanished, leaving not so much as a trace of Balrog behind.

In just a single day, my entire life was upended...or rather, it might be better to say that it went back to the way it was always meant to be. I was returned to my former self—to the me who couldn’t escape from the bondage of heroism, not even by erasing his own memories.

By pure chance, I happened upon a book that lay discarded on the ground. Rei’s book.

—I promise I’ll tell you all about it when I finish reading, Koh!

I couldn’t read braille on my own, so I’d been genuinely happy when she promised to tell me the book’s story. But now, there was nobody left to read it.

Its cover was stained with blood, blotting out everything except the knight.

Having a Hottie Come Visit You When You're Sick Isn't Always as Good as It Sounds

"Rei..."

I woke up with a start as her name spilled from my lips. The setting sun shone through the window, bathing the hot and stuffy room in its orange glow. Surprisingly, it was a room I knew well—apparently I'd made it back to my apartment in the end, in spite of everything. I'd also neglected to turn on the air conditioner, which would explain the "hot and stuffy" part. I was drenched with sweat, and the cries of the cicadas outside didn't help at all. They might be a classic poetic symbol for summertime, but they also make it even harder to ignore the heat.

I hadn't bothered to change clothes, or even take my shoes off. By all appearances, I'd collapsed in my entryway and fallen asleep then and there. But on the bright side, at least I hadn't passed out in a pile of garbage like a drunkard. Besides, my apartment was one of those absurdly tiny studios, so the boundary between the entryway and the actual room wasn't well defined to begin with.

I tried to push myself upright, but it didn't work. My arms had the structural integrity of a pair of overcooked noodles and collapsed under me after only a couple painful seconds of ineffectual effort.

"That was a dream...right?" It'd been ages since the last time I'd dreamed, and it was beyond clear, beyond vivid. It was about people beloved to me and places I missed dearly... Part of me wished it really *had* all just been a dream, even though the rest of me knew I didn't have the right to think like that.

Even if it was just a dream, and even if I knew it would inevitably reach the same nightmarish ending as ever, I was just so happy to see them again...and so disgusted with myself for thinking that way, I wanted to just kill myself and get it over with.

Ding-dong!

Suddenly, my doorbell rang. I had a visitor, which was certainly a rarity. My apartment building was so old and dingy that even the newspaper salesmen walked right on past it, and I didn't have any deliveries scheduled either. Myourenji and her family were providing me the funding I needed to live there, and they sent some of their staff over to check up on me every once in a while, but those people never bothered with the doorbell—they just walked right in. *Wish they'd be a bit more considerate about that, actually.*

"Kunugi-kun? Are you in?" somebody called out from the other side of the door. I knew I'd heard her voice before, but I couldn't quite tell who it was. I was in a daze. Hard to say whether it was because I was in a bad enough physical state that I couldn't even sit up or because I'd just woken up from an incredibly lifelike dream, but in any case, her voice sounded fuzzy and distant—like I was underwater.

"I'm coming in, okay?" I heard the door crack open. It would have been more surprising if I'd *had* the presence of mind to lock it, considering the state I was in. "Kunugi-kun?!"

"Kiryu...?" Shockingly enough, my classmate Kiryu Kyouka stepped inside. Kiryu was an absolutely by-the-book honor student-type heroine with long, black hair and a bad case of resting bitch face (she's also a loner, surprise surprise). She's got huge boobs and a black belt in Aikido too, but I have yet to conclusively determine if those traits count as part of the archetype or not.

Why would someone like her come over to the place of an extra like me? I dimly pondered the situation as she freaked out and started trying to help me sit up. Letting a girl literally pick me up was just a step too far for my manly pride, though, so I mustered up what *very* little strength I had left and stood up on my own. My spaghetti arms actually somehow managed to push me off the ground this time. *I guess you can push yourself to some pretty incredible extremes when your pride's on the line.*

"Thanks... I'm fine, though, really."

"You are obviously *not* fine," she retorted.

“I was, umm, just practicing. Making sure I’d be ready if anyone ever set a bear trap in my entryway while I was out and about, yeah.”

“I’m even less convinced that you’re fine than I was before! Literally no one would be reassured by that story.” *Ooooof!* Her merciless retort scored a critical hit directly to my heart. She had a real talent for those—it’s not easy to pack the “are you completely insane” nuance in on the fly like that. Incidentally, the optimal response would’ve been, “Of course they wouldn’t! Nobody likes to think about the ever-present bear trap threat,” but I wasn’t in an optimal state of mind, to say the least.

“Anyway, why’re you here, Kiryu? You’re number one on my list of people I never expected to show up in this sort of situation.”

“Why would you even have a list like that...? And don’t get the wrong idea. I only came here because our teacher asked me to.” She pulled a bundle of handouts and worksheets from her bag. Upon closer inspection, she was still wearing her uniform. I was starting to put the pieces together: it seemed I’d staggered my way home the night before, passed out on the spot, and slept all the way until school was out the next day.

“You really don’t look well, Kunugi-kun... You can’t possibly be all right. Here, let me help you. You should be lying down. *In bed.*”

“Mom...?”

“Wrong. I can only imagine how hard your mother had it raising you, really...” She mumbled to herself as she helped me stay upright. Come to think of it, she *did* claim that we were childhood friends back in the day. My immediate reaction, of course, was *why me?* Wouldn’t it make more sense for her to be childhood friends with my favorite protagonist, Kaito-kun? That would go down as one of humanity’s greatest unsolved mysteries, surely. *Were you even paying attention when you wrote that part of the backstory, God?*

“There you go...” she muttered, helping me into bed.

“Ugh... Thanks, I really needed that.”

“I-I wasn’t doing it for you, for the record! I did it for the workout.”

“What am I, a dumbbell?”

“You’d be better off if you were. Dumbbells are useful.”

“Can’t argue with that.” My “bed” was just a futon laid out on the floor, but as I flopped onto it, I came to the immediate realization that even that most modest form of bedding was worlds apart from sleeping on the ground. Kiryu sat down nearby to watch over me, her knees folded up to her chest. She was wearing a skirt, of course, so I could just baaarely catch a glimpse of...nothing, actually. *Dang, she’s good at this!*

“I’m a bit surprised by how sparsely you’ve decorated this place,” she commented. “I’ve always thought that boys who live on their own tend to be more cluttered.”

“I’m not exactly materialistic.”

“Hmmm,” she replied with a perfunctory grunt, ogling my room. I wasn’t sure why she was looking that closely, actually. You could tell at a glance that I didn’t have much stuff, and she wasn’t going to uncover any deep, dark secrets by nosing around.

“Sorry, I’m not exactly being a great host. Should’ve brought out some tea or something.”

“I don’t mind. You’re sick, and I wasn’t expecting anything of the sort in the first place. I should get something for you, come to think of it—where do you keep your drinks?”

“Kitchen’s right over there, and the tap water’s all-you-can-drink.”

“In other words, tap water’s all you have...?” She sighed, and I could appreciate why she’d be exasperated, but I wasn’t exactly anticipating guests. The only people who ever came over were the aforementioned folks from the Myourenji household, and they always brought some sort of drink or whatever with them as a matter of courtesy. Why would I bother stocking up when I could get everything I needed from a convenience store that was less than five minutes away on foot?

“What have you been eating?”

“Y’know, convenience store lunches. That sorta stuff.”

“Don’t you think you should cook for yourself? Those boxed meals aren’t even remotely balanced, nutritionally speaking.” She seemed to be implying that my poor diet had something to do with my current sorry state. “Are you bad at cooking?”

“I can put stuff in the microwave.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“What, you some kind of master home-cook?”

“I’d like to think I’m competent, at least.” She didn’t seem prideful about it—she was just stating it as a matter of course. Oddly enough, that made it easier to believe she knew what she was doing than if she’d bragged about her skills. Frankly, I thought that was a missed opportunity. Being surprisingly klutzy in the kitchen is a selling point for characters like her!

While I was busy analyzing the odds of her knowing what she was doing, Kiryu opened up my refrigerator and looked aghast to find that it was totally empty. *Really wish you’d stop rummaging around in my room without permission, thanks.*

“I’ll bring something with me the next time I come over.”

“‘The next time’?”

“I-If there *is* a next time, I mean!” She spun around and quickly amended her statement. *No surprise there—this is definitely an exceptional case.* My apartment’s only redeeming quality was the fact that it had a roof to sleep under, so I’d be more than a little surprised if she ever found a reason to visit again.

“By the way, why *did* you come here?”

“To give you your handouts. Didn’t I already say that?”

“I mean, you did, but isn’t sending someone to my house for that after just one day a bit much? And aren’t you a weird pick for the job?”

“*You’re* a bit much. You know you’re supposed to turn in your career planning sheet at some point this week, right?”

“Oooh, yeah...” I recalled. “At some point this week” would, of course, mean

“no later than tomorrow.” I’d completely forgotten. I figured that since Oumei High was a college prep school I could just write “college” and be done with it, but I never actually bothered to do that in the first place.

“Will you even be *able* to go to school tomorrow? You look awful...”

“It’s not as bad as it looks; I’ll be there. I’ve run through all my sick leave anyway.”

“High school doesn’t give you sick leave.”

“What, seriously?! How exploitative is that?!”

“Considering we don’t get paid, very.” Kiryu smiled, and I couldn’t help but be fascinated by her for a moment. It was really rare for her to play along with my nonsense.

“Okay, but you still haven’t explained why they sent *you*.” I was slightly embarrassed about getting caught off guard like that, so I changed the subject. Thankfully, Kiryu didn’t seem to pick up on my motive.

“Would you have preferred if Ayase-kun came instead?”

“I mean, everyone knows we’re friends. He seems like the natural choice.”

She paused, then muttered sulkily, “I’m your childhood friend too.”

“Huh?” *I mean, yeah, I guess?* Not that I could remember it, unfortunately. I only had Kiryu’s account of our history together to go by. In any case, that history was very specifically between Kiryu and me, and nobody else. I’d only learned about it myself very recently, and since nobody else at Oumei High had known us back then, there wasn’t any other way for the info to leak out. How could *that* have led to her being singled out for this job? “Did you tell somebody about us?”

“No, not exactly. But, well, I ended up talking with Kotou-san, and...”

“Kotou? So she figured it out after all?”

“You knew?”

“I had a feeling, considering what happened Monday morning.” Kotou Tsumugi was Kaito’s cheerful, beautiful childhood friend. She’d spent quite a

long time harboring a (totally one-sided) animosity towards Kiryu (on account of an inferiority complex regarding her bust size), but on the aforementioned Monday morning she'd dragged Kiryu off for a conversation, only to return with her hostility completely cleared away and replaced by an excess of camaraderie.

I assumed that she'd already caught on to our relationship at that point, and judging by Kiryu's reaction to my speculation, I'd hit the bull's-eye. Seriously, though, how is that even possible? I'd only learned about it myself on Saturday, and she'd already blown our cover wide open two days later? Just how good is her nose for this sort of stuff?

I sighed. "I swear that girl has a childhood friend fetish."

"She has a *what?*"

"She loves childhood friends as a general concept. It's a *whole thing*." Skipping over any speculation about how Kaito might play into that little trait of hers, Kotou always got super hyped up when childhood friends turned up in movies, song lyrics, and pretty much everywhere else, to the point that one might assume she was, y'know, *into* it. Her love for childhood friends was completely self-professed, so she might've been deliberately playing the whole thing up. Whether or not it was genuine, there wasn't a chance in hell she'd stay quiet about Kiryu and me being childhood friends if she found out.

"But Kotou's not even in our class! She wouldn't bust into another class's homeroom just to make you deliver a bunch of worksheets."

"W-Well, the thing is..."

"Kiryu?" For some reason, she was acting really bashful. It was weirdly *sexy*, *ahem*. It was weirdly, uhh, weird.

"I volunteered."

"Huh?"

"Kotou-san came to see me at lunchtime. She told me that you'd never skip school without telling *somebody* about it in advance, that something had definitely happened to you, and that, as your childhood friend, it was my responsibility to go check up on you. So, well, here I am."

“Sounds like she swindled you.”

“Well, what was I supposed to do?! I had no idea what was going on!”

I didn't know whether she'd volunteered in front of the whole class or talked with our teacher about it in private, but considering how aloof she usually acted, I figured our teacher probably saw her being proactive about getting involved with another student as a great opportunity. No wonder she had given out my address without my consent. *Feels like a huge violation of privacy standards, but whatever.*

“So, do you, like, want the two of us to be the sort of childhood friends that Kotou always goes on about?” I asked.

“I'm not sure,” she replied after a moment of hesitation. She seemed to genuinely consider the idea, so I was pretty sure she was being honest. She really didn't know what she wanted. “It couldn't be worse than the one-sided grudge I had against you up until recently. It wasn't exactly pleasant feeling resentful all the time. Being childhood friends like that might almost be refreshing in comparison. It *would* be a bit embarrassing, but it's better than treating you coldly again... And I certainly can't treat you coldly right *now*. You're *already* sick.”

“Weird time to start worrying about me, but thanks.”

I was about to crack up, but suddenly, the dream I'd just had flashed through my mind. Kiryu bore no resemblance to *her* whatsoever, but I was starting to feel comfortable around her, and that set off a warning bell in the back of my mind. My instincts were telling me not to let my guard down. That if I let her in any further, it would all happen all over again.

A combination of the dream's lingering aftereffects and my state of physical weakness caused me to be overwhelmed by pessimism. It brought back all the trauma that I'd forgotten—or rather, that I'd been desperately trying to ignore.

“Kunugi-kun?”

I must've been grimacing in pain. Kiryu realized that something was wrong and looked concerned as she bent over to take a closer look at me. “I'm fine, I'm fine! Anyway, shouldn't you be going home soon? The sun's still out for

now, but you definitely don't wanna end up walking home in the dark."

"I can't just leave you alone when you're this sick."

"It's really not a big deal."

"Even if it isn't, you live alone, don't you? There's no guarantee your condition won't get worse, and you don't want to be on your own if it does."

"What, are you gonna stay here overnight?"

She paused. "I can't say I haven't considered the possibility." I didn't get the sense she'd actually made her mind up about that. It sounded more like she was just being contrary, though I had no clue where her obstinacy was coming from. Maybe she was feeling sensitive about how I'd been trying to drive her out, or maybe Kotou's influence had her thinking she should act more like a proper childhood friend? Who knows.

"You *really* don't have to go that far."

"I don't care whether I *have to* or not! I'm here because I *want* to be. You might not understand, but I can't leave you alone when you're in this state, so I'm going to keep an eye on you."

"What, you think I'm gonna make a break for it if you take your eyes off me? I don't even have the energy to get out of bed right now!"

"See?! You really *are* seriously ill!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

We were butting heads out of pure stubbornness at that point. The atmosphere was getting progressively more and more combative. *Maybe if I'd been a bit more polite about hinting that I wanted her to leave, she would've gone home without a fuss? Too late to apologize about being blunt now, though.*

"Fine, then! I'll contact my parents, and tell them I'm staying at a friend's house tonight!"

"What?! Hey!" Kiryu pulled out her phone, pointedly ignoring me like a

petulant child. I was grateful that she was worried about me, and she hadn't done anything wrong at all, but the fact was that things just weren't working out the way I'd hoped they would. And *that* was starting to get on my nerves. But just when the tension in the room was reaching critical mass, an unexpected element arrived to complicate things even further.

"No need to worry, Kiryu-san. *I'll* stay here tonight to nurse Kou back to health." An eloquent voice rang out from my front door. Standing there was a beautiful girl with long, wavy blonde hair. She looked just as out of place in my run-down wreck of an apartment as Kiryu.

"President Myourenji...?" Kiryu sounded like she couldn't believe her own eyes. Why would she be *here*, of all places?

Myourenji Renge was the president of Oumei High's student council. This might make her sound like a big fish in a small pond, but there wasn't a single student at our school who didn't know her name. She was a real celebrity, consistently placing in the top ranks of the national mock exams, and constantly relied upon by the teachers—in spite of the fact that her attendance numbers were, to say the least, lackluster.

She showed up to class the absolute bare minimum number of times required, spending the rest of her time stationed in the student council's office. She was a real eccentric in that respect, but very few people acknowledged those strange qualities of hers. Geniuses can get away with an awful lot without raising any eyebrows.

"What's the president of the student council doing *here*?" Kiryu unsurprisingly and immediately voiced her doubts. Whether Kiryu knew about her fame, her eccentric traits, both, or neither, it wouldn't change the fact that it was unthinkable for her to show up at my home.

"Isn't it natural for one of my status to visit a student when he's sick? I consider it a part of my duties," she said as she locked the door behind her and then pulled off her shoes. Her excuse was dubious in all sorts of ways, and though Kiryu obviously instantly realized it was a lie, she didn't let her elegant heiress act drop for a second. "I'm surprised, though. You seem even more ill than I'd imagined."

“I’m fine. The door’s right behind you whenever you’re ready to leave, by the way.”

“How very considerate of you to let me know,” Renge replied as she sat down next to Kiryu. She proceeded to open up the convenience store bag she was carrying. She clearly had no intention of leaving whatsoever. “I bought some pudding on my way over. You like pudding, don’t you, Kunugi-kun?”

“Ugh...” Kiryu groaned. It felt more like Renge was trying to prove a point to Kiryu than to me, and judging by that little noise she just made, it was working. That line came across as pretty snide, considering that Kiryu hadn’t brought any sort of “get well” gift. *Let’s just try not to think about how she knew that Kiryu hadn’t brought anything. And for the record, I don’t even like pudding that much. It’s fine, I guess.*

“Oh, I know,” the president said with a smile, “why don’t I feed you? It’s an incredible honor to be fed pudding by someone like me.”

“Wow, you really just said that about yourself? *Yikes*,” I replied.

“Oh, my word! What a rude manner of speaking.” She kept the company-president’s-daughter act up to the bitter end as she opened the (cheap, commoner-grade convenience store) pudding, but her smile made it clear that she was enjoying this. Kiryu, in contrast, was frowning as she watched our exchange.

“Do you two know each other?” Kiryu asked all of a sudden.

“Err, ah, I mean...”

“We have a mutual acquaintance in Ayase-kun.” The question was aimed at me, but the president intercepted it. Meanwhile, she scooped up a spoonful of pudding, holding it out to me with a “Say ‘aaaah’!” Kiryu gaped in astonishment. *Why not feed it to her instead? Look, she’s ready for it already!*

“Okay, seriously, how far are you planning on taking thimphgh?!” She mercilessly shoved the pudding into my mouth mid-sentence. The plastic spoon was chilly, and the pudding itself was incredibly sweet. I suddenly realized that I hadn’t had a bite to eat since the day before.

“How is it? Tasty?”

“Y-Yeah, it is.”

“Hee hee! I’m glad to hear it.” She beamed with delight, which predictably only deepened Kiryu’s skeptical glare.

“So, how *do* you two know each other?” she repeated.

“Didn’t I already tell you? Through Ayase-kun.”

“And that’s *all*?” Her relentless questioning made it clear that she didn’t believe that was all in the least. In other circumstances, having a mutual friend might be a reasonable explanation, but again, this is a small pond of a high school we’re talking about. In a community of that size, it’s practically a given that you’d have friends-of-friends all over the place. If the student council president had truly made a habit of visiting students and force-feeding them pudding, that information would’ve entered the rumor mill ages ago.

“We’re family,” the president bluntly stated.

Kiryu paused, flabbergasted. “You’re *what*?”

“You might also say our relationship is especially intimate.”

“*Excuse me?!*”

“Okay, seriously, stop lying to her.” I *had* to cut in at that point—she was carrying her joke way too far. My entire body was already in pain, and her antics just made the sinking ache in the pit of my stomach all the worse.

“Oh, you could’ve let me have my fun for a little while longer,” she grumbled, then thrust her hand into one of my pockets. Before Kiryu or I could react she pulled it back out, now holding a ring.

“D-Did you slip that in there while you were feeding me the pudding?”

“That’s right! I thought it would be funny.” She pulled another ring of the same design out of her skirt’s pocket. “The same design” meaning that she’d been going for an engagement ring joke. *It...was just a joke, right?* “I was planning on following through with it if you let me play it out to the end, of course.”

“If you carry a joke like that all the way to the end, it’s not a joke!”

“Really, though—what’s going on between you two?” Kiryu mumbled. She definitely wasn’t keeping up with the conversation (though considering the nature of said conversation, I’d be sorta scared if she was).

“I was telling the truth when I said we’re family,” the president answered. “He’s my relative. My second cousin, specifically.”

“Your ‘second cousin’?”

“We’re as related as cod and salmon roe.”

Kiryu paused. “Salmon roe, as in, salmon eggs?” She was even more confused than ever. *Don’t look at me—Renge tried to explain it to me way back whenever, and I didn’t get it either. If you wanna complain, go bother her.*

“I think that’s enough discussion of our relation to one another, for the moment. Just keep in mind that our marriage *is* legitimate.”

“I thought you were finished with that joke.”

“‘Joke’?” Renge cocked her head and played dumb. *Seriously, that’s not funny! Stop it!* “We’re also family in the sense that my father is currently acting as his guardian.”

“His guardian...? But, what about his parents?”

“Kou hasn’t told you?”

That one sentence was enough for Kiryu to put the pieces together, or at least make an educated guess. She fell silent, and her gaze drifted to the floor. She’d known my parents. I could only imagine what emotions were going through her head at that moment, but I knew without a doubt that they were nothing pleasant. An incredibly awkward atmosphere dominated the room.

“In any case, as you can surmise, Kou and I are more or less husband and—”

“Renge.”

“More or less brother and sister!” she concluded proudly, head high and chest out. *Ample* chest out. Even more so than Kiryu’s. “I’m perfectly capable and willing to nurse Kou back to health, so you’re welcome to scurry home any time you wish, Kiryu-san.”

“Grr...” Kiryu gritted her teeth. Renge’s provocation was flagrant, not to mention perfectly engineered to provoke Kiryu, considering how stubborn she could be about this sort of thing. I wanted to ask why they couldn’t just talk this through peacefully, but considering I’d provoked Kiryu just as effectively mere moments before while discussing the exact same topic, I didn’t really have the right to judge.

“I was here first,” Kiryu countered, “and I have no intention of foisting the responsibility of taking care of him on someone else.”

“Perhaps, but that’s no reason for you to watch over him throughout the entirety of his illness. Don’t you think that would be too heavy of a burden to ask of one person? Why not let somebody else carry part of the load?”

Kiryu hesitated but didn’t give in. “That won’t be necessary.”

“What’s most important is giving him the opportunity to rest, isn’t it? Two caretakers would be excessive in a room this small.”

“Are you really that dead set on sending me home?”

“I suppose that asking a girl to walk home in the dark *would* be a touch dangerous. If necessary, I can call someone over to escort you on your way.”

Kiryu was at an obvious disadvantage. Her opponent was a very, *very* distant relative, but the surrogate sister factor made up for said distance. Kiryu, meanwhile, was a childhood friend and not much else. With that as her only weapon, she stood little chance of sticking it out until the sun set.

And I, for one, was perfectly fine with that! Not to say that I *wanted* to end up alone with Renge, but you have to set your goals realistically. If I tried to get rid of both of them at once, it could backfire spectacularly—gotta take what I can get! Once Kiryu was out of the picture, I could focus on Renge, and dealing with one person would be a whole lot easier. I felt a bit bad for Kiryu, but it had to be done.

“All right, I understand... In that case, I’ll be leaving now, Kunugi-kun.”

“Very good! Thank you for your understanding, Kiryu-san. Now then, Kou, I’ll be in the kitchen. I have the perfect medicinal recipe in mind to perk you right back up!”

“Huh?” *Wait. A medicinal recipe? Like, as in, making one?* “R-Renge-san? You don’t mean—you *can’t* mean you’re making it yourself, right?”

“Hee hee! Do you really even need to ask?”

“Phew! Yeah, stupid question. Can’t believe I thought a girl like you would even consider—”

“Of course I’ll be cooking it! I mean, really!”

“*KIRYUUUUU! HEEELP! YOU’RE MY ONLY HOPE!*” She’d *just* given in to Renge’s pressure and was on her way out the door, but I desperately called her back in. Thankfully she was *literally* on her way out the door at the time, meaning it was still open, and she could hear me just fine. She stopped and turned around.

“K-Kunugi-kun?”

“You’ve gotta stop Renge! She’s saying she’s gonna cook something *medicinal!*”

Kiryu frowned. “Well, good for you. Are you trying to brag?”

“*Hell* no! You don’t understand—she’s a cheftastrophe!”

Indeed, Myourenji Renge was a cheftastrophe: a particular sort of human who absolutely ruins the hard work of all the wonderful farmers and fishermen who supply us with our daily provisions. It was her most definite, inescapably terrible character flaw.

My mind immediately flashed back to the period just after I arrived in this world, when I was still living in the Myourenji household. Whoosh, screen fades to white, commence flashback!

Kou Has a Five-Second Flashback

“Tomorrow’s your birthday, isn’t it, Kou?”

“My birthday?” Renge brought the subject up out of nowhere, and I glanced over at the nearby calendar. It was August 24th, which would imply that the 25th was my birthday. “Is it...?”

“It is! By the way, mine is May 2nd.”

“I know. You forced me to celebrate it with you.”

“Oh, good! If you remember, then ‘forcing’ you to celebrate it was worth all the effort!”

“Augh, ow, ow!” Renge grinned as she pinched my cheek as hard as she could. Apparently she hadn’t taken kindly to me using the word “forced.”

I’d become a lot more sensitive to pain since arriving in this world. It was so hard to move my body around that it felt like I was constantly carrying a pack full of weights, and I tired out in a fraction of the time I used to. I couldn’t say for sure if I’d been weakened or if my body was adapting to suit the peaceful world I’d found myself in, but either way, the effects were very noticeable.

“That hurt...”

“Hee hee! You pushed your luck a bit too far.” Renge chuckled as she released me, and I slumped to the floor. I *really* didn’t find it funny, for the record. Renge was still young enough that you could call her a “girl” without sounding condescending, and yet she was somehow strong enough to crush an apple one-handed. *Freaky*. “Now then, Kou—this will be your first birthday since you joined my household, so I’ve done a lot of thinking about how best to celebrate it!”

I hesitated. “If this is going to get messy, I don’t wanna.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I have no intention of going overboard! For one thing, only an absolute imbecile would think about going outside in this miserable heat.”

I paused once more. “Haven’t you spent every single day since summer vacation started lazing around at home? This feels like an excuse—don’t you think you should, y’know, go outside every once in a while? This indoor lifestyle you’ve got going can’t be healthy.”

“AAAHHHHH! I can’t hear you, I can’t hear youuu!” Renge plugged her ears and put on an extremely unconvincing not-listening act. It seemed she was perfectly aware of how slovenly she’d been recently. As it just so happened, she was in full sloth mode at that very moment, lying facedown on the sofa and moving as little as possible.

“Kou, you’re going to be a really boring person when you grow up if you’re always this obsessed with *logic* and *sound arguments*.”

“Am I?”

“Throwing in a joke every once in a while makes you look like a deeper and more well-rounded person, probably!”

“‘Probably’?”

“The ‘probably’ there was me throwing a joke in. See? Just like that!” *Oh, okay, I think I get it. Good to know.* Renge was certainly a lazy slob, but she had moments in which she was extremely levelheaded and reliable. Maybe that balance between her reliable side and her ridiculous side was what made her a well-rounded person.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Well, now I feel a little guilty... Meh, it’ll probably be fine. Anyway, back to your birthday!”

“Right, sure.”

“We’ll spend all day lazing around and watching one of my favorite anime! How’s that sound?!”

“It sounds like the same thing we do every day.” My personal circumstances being what they were, it was decided that I wouldn’t attend middle school at all. I spent almost every day in Renge’s house, and she’d made a habit of forcing me to watch “anime”—a form of video-based storytelling that she was

apparently obsessed with. She *was* attending school on a day-to-day basis, of course, but ever since summer vacation started she'd taken up permanent residence at home. Her plan for my birthday really was exactly the same as our daily routine.

“And on top of that, I'll serve you a hand-cooked meal packed absolutely full with my love!”

“With your ‘love’...?”

Love. It wasn't a word that put me in the best of moods, to say the least, but I knew the love she meant was a familial one. I mean, probably—not like I could read her mind. In any case, I thought back on it and realized that this would probably be my first time experiencing her cooking. Her house had servants... I mean, butlers and maids who would prepare all the meals, generally speaking.

“Do you even know how to cook?”

“But of course!” She poked her head up from the sofa just enough to shoot me a self-satisfied smirk. Seeing her so absolutely full of unreserved self-confidence made me feel like I couldn't trust her at all. Funny how that works. “The world of cooking is a world of instinct! In other words, it's a world in which a multitalented, beautiful genius like myself naturally excels! My cooking is so exceptional, it's made numerous people howl with joy in the past!”

“Has it...?” Renge *was* supposedly known as a genius in the outside world. If she was that confident, I really didn't have any reason to doubt her...and yet, somehow, I remained unconvinced. My own “instincts” I'd honed over the course of my life up to that point—the self-preservation ones, that is—were blaring their warning sirens at full volume, telling me that something was *wrong*.

“Have you decided what you're going to cook?”

“I'll leave it up to instinct!”

I paused. “What about, like, a theme? Like, Japanese food? Western food? Meat dishes?”

“I'll leave that up to instinct too!”

“...”

I decided not to think about it.

The next day, I walked into the kitchen to find Renge surrounded by a massive pile of ingredients she'd ordered from an online supermarket. Her father, Gouki, had said something about having very important business to attend to at work and left early in the morning after wishing me both a “happy birthday!” and a “best of luck.”

“All right, Kou, watch and learn! *This* is how you handle a cooking knife!”

“Right,” I said, a bit skeptical. I didn't know much at all about cooking, but I was starting to get a bad feeling about all this.

There are plenty of perfectly valid ingredients out there that have bright, vivid colorations that prompt an instinctual “that's poison” reaction, and those that produce an absolutely gut-wrenching stench. “Cooking” as a field could be described as the practice of putting together ingredients like that and making them edible.

Even with all that said, when you look at something that *should* by all appearances be inedible and think about eating it, there's always a moment where your stomach tries to punish you for that decision in advance. That is *precisely* what I was experiencing.

“R-Renge? Are you planning on using *all* of that stuff?”

“Why, of course! Every ingredient on this table is a delicacy, special-ordered both domestically and from overseas!”

“D-Delicacies, huh? Don't those, y'know, need to be prepared in some special, specific way to make them turn out right?”

“That's where my intuition and *instincts* come in. After all, the very first people to ever try eating all of these ingredients had no idea how to prepare them either! Just think of me as one of those culinary pioneers.”

I was getting really worried. “Umm, I don't think you should make light of the thousands of years our predecessors spent accumulating cooking experience...”

“‘Fools learn from experience, but the wise learn from history,’ is it? There's

truth to that, I'll admit."

I heaved a sigh of relief. Super high-class ingredients like those are in a lot higher demand than supply lines can keep up with, hiking the cost way up. People with the technical skills to properly prepare them are few and far between too, so the price of that expertise gets tacked on as well. I had no doubt that there were at least a few of those hyper-specialized ingredients in Renge's pile, and not even a genius like her could prepare them by winging it through instinct alone.

"But don't people also say that anything's edible if you cook it for long enough?"

"Who the *hell* says that?!"

"By the way, I haven't stocked any poisonous ingredients *this* time. No pufferfish here! Be sure to try this at home, kids!"

"That means you *knew* this was a bad idea! This was premeditated, wasn't it?!" Renge started chucking every single one of the high-grade ingredients she'd procured into a stockpot. She looked like a character right out of a fairy tale—specifically like an old, withered witch deep in the dark, scary woods, cackling as she stirred her evil magic potion.

"S-Sebas-san..." I reflexively muttered the name of one of the butlers who worked in Renge's house. The only person who could possibly bring the situation under control was the one who'd been hired specifically to work under Renge: Sebas-san, aka Sebastian. I grabbed the phone that was installed in the living room and hit the speed dial. My call was answered after a single ring.

"Hello?! Is this Sebas-san?!"

"Kou-kun," a woman's voice replied after a pause. Her *actual* name was Seba Sumiko. Renge had taken to calling her "Sebas" in spite of the fact that she was a woman, though, and the name sorta stuck. She was one of the very few people who could smoothly cope with Renge's unreasonable demands and was just an incredibly capable woman all around. In spite of that, she replied with a somber, dreary tone that suggested she'd given up on just about everything.

"Happy birthday..."

"Huh? Ah, err, thanks."

“I would have preferred to offer my congratulations in person, but the young mistress insisted that the two of you would spend the day alone together and wouldn’t permit it.”

“D-Did she...? But, umm, you should know that things are looking really, *really bad* over here right now...”

“Yes... I’m well aware. *Painfully* aware. I’ve partaken of her cooking before.” Somehow, I was getting an incredibly clear image of Sebas-san gazing out into the distance, glassy-eyed and defeated.

“I think she said something about her food making people ‘howl with joy’...?”

“Yes... We howled; that’s certainly true. Though I would characterize them as more akin to agonized death-wails, frankly.”

“...”

“As such, I must admit that I was relieved to learn that she chose you as her only target this time around. You have my sincerest apologies, but I absolutely refuse to go anywhere near that house today.”

“W-Wait! If she’s done this to people before, then surely somebody could’ve stopped her by now?! Couldn’t you have told her that if she never gets better at cooking, she should just stop trying...?”

“Kou-kun,” Sebas-san began, sounding incredibly calm and gentle, “this is just how it has to be with cheftastrophes.”

“Chef...tastrophes...?”

“Individuals who are catastrophically bad at cooking... Or, rather, individuals who are prodigiously talented at cooking meals that could only be described as catastrophic. Those people are known as cheftastrophes. In a cheftastrophe’s hands, the most highly prized and officially certified A-5 wagyu steak on the market could be transformed into *literal garbage* that is so offensive in appearance and odor, not even flies would touch it—and they’d need nothing more than a stovetop and their own innate ‘talent’ to do so.”

“‘L-Literal garbage’...?”

“It would not be an exaggeration to say that their talent for cataclysm is a

fundamental aspect of their very being, and the young mistress's skill in the kitchen is very much of *that* nature. She fulfills all of the conditions required to qualify for the title."

"Is there *anything* I can do to stop her?"

"There is not," she declared bluntly and definitively. In other words, I was stuck. There was no way out. "If I may be so audacious as to offer a word of advice, I'd urge you to hold strong, and endure as well as you can."

The true weight of her father's "best of luck" was finally starting to bear down on me. From the sound of things, he and Sebas-san had both fallen victim to Renge's cooking in the past.

"One last thing," she added. "You *must* compliment her without reservation. Whatever she makes, be absolutely sure to tell her it was delicious."

I paused, thoroughly confused. "Huh?"

"I cannot overstate how vitally important this is. Praise her. Tell her it was good. Do you understand?"

"Wait, what? Sebas-san, I'm not sure I—"

"Kou?" Renge called out from behind me. "It's ready!"

"It would seem we're out of time. I wish you the best of luck, Kou-kun." She hung up, leaving me with the same words Gouki-san had.

"Kou? Were you on the phone?" Suddenly, the foreboding sense of doom I'd been feeling made total sense. The most dangerous enemies are the ones you think are your friends—especially when they themselves are unaware of how much of a threat to you they really are. Renge's proud, confident smile drove that truth into my mind with uncomfortable clarity. "It's time to eat! I made plenty, so feel free to ask for seconds!"

"G-Great..."

The table looked like a particularly creative impressionist artist's paint palette. It was packed end-to-end with vividly colored dishes of all shapes and sizes. I gulped reflexively as she led me by the hand towards it. The whole table had an incredibly intimidating aura that only grew in intensity as I approached it. Even

the *steam* that wafted up from her cooking looked colorful, which definitely wasn't a good sign.

"Kou?"

"Wh-What...?"

"Happy birthday. I can't tell you how grateful I am that you were born and that you're here with me today." Her words were warm and genuine, in theory. In practice, I could only hear them as a pronouncement of my death sentence.

What followed serves as conclusive proof of my own lack of willpower. I can only remember up to the point where she said, "Okay, eat up!" and I picked up my spoon. The next thing I knew, I was sitting on the couch, watching TV while Renge leaned up against me. We'd sat down to eat at midday, but somehow, the sky outside was already tinged with the red glow of sunset.

"It's already evening, isn't it...?" Renge muttered to herself. I didn't think she'd realized that I was awake. "I'm so sorry about today, Kou."

"Huh?" *She apologized? Why?* I couldn't remember anything that had happened between our meal and that moment, so I was left at a loss.

"You didn't like my cooking, right? I was really happy that you ate it all anyway, but I could tell..." She continued her monologue with incredible timing, and suddenly, I was wide awake. *I ate that stuff? All of it?! And apparently I let the fact that I thought it was nasty slip during my unconscious feeding frenzy too!* "I'm not giving up here, though, I swear! My mother always told me that the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach! I'll cook for you every day until I figure out what sort of food you like, I promise!"

Her courageous proclamation made my blood run cold. I finally understood Sebas-san's advice, but it was too late. I'd already provoked Renge's stubborn streak.

From then on, Renge forced me to eat a wide variety of foods that she personally prepared every single day. Like, literally, *every single day*. At first I'd consistently pass out, but as I grew used to her cooking, I gradually developed the ability to remain conscious, which was hellish in its own right. In fact, I

speculated that if they served food in Hell, it would probably be just about as pungent and noxious as the crap she produced.

I was powerless against her cooking and had no choice but to give in. In other words, I was forced to follow Sebas-san's advice and lie to her. I said it was good. Her cooking binge had been motivated entirely by her competitive nature, so she stopped force-feeding me the moment I gave in. Of course, the pain I felt in the pit of my stomach whenever she proudly bragged about how I "love her cooking" and how she'd "save it for special occasions" so I "won't get bored of it" was intense, to say the least.

It wasn't a guilty sort of stomach pain, to be clear. I didn't feel the slightest shred of guilt about lying to her—I was the victim, no question about it. I wasn't alone in that opinion either. I knew for a fact that any of the other victims of her cooking would back me up. No, there was just one clear source of my discomfort: the fear that I'd once again end up the guinea pig for her demonic test kitchen. That fear was enough to keep a strained, artificial smile permanently plastered across my face.

On Second Thought, Hotties Make the Best Visitors After All

And so, my flashback ended and I returned to reality. The reality in which I'd just shouted the word "cheftastrophe" as loudly as possible. *Oh. Oh god, I did, didn't I?! I just called Renge a cheftastrophe to her face!* My poor physical condition must've been influencing my thought process—I'd completely lost my ability to make rational decisions.

But, wait. If I ate Renge's cooking in my current state, there's no way I'd be able to resist its effects! I'd die for sure, or at least end up in a state where I might as well be dead! Calling Kiryu back and asking her to nurse me instead would mean that Renge—and, by extension, her cooking—would be forced to exit the scene. Then I'd just have to convince Kiryu to leave after she was gone! *Yeah, this is a good plan! This'll work!*

"Kou?" Renge started, a bit slowly. "What do you mean by 'cheftastrophe'?" You pointed *at* me, but...you weren't talking *about* me, were you?" She cocked her head quizzically. An ever-so-slight shadow was beginning to cloud her expression. She'd totally dropped the high-and-mighty rich-girl tone she always made sure to use in public, as well.

"I'm quite certain, Miss President, that he was indeed talking about you. You were the one who was talking about cooking something medicinal, after all," Kiryu answered in my place. *And, I mean, she's right, but did she really have to say it that bluntly? Kinda pouring salt on the wound, there!*

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, Kiryu-san. Kou has told me that he loves my cooking, and I firmly believe that he wasn't lying." *I was lying. I'm so, so sorry.*

"If I may be blunt, it seems clear from his current state that he's genuinely terrified of your cooking. This is just conjecture on my part, but have you ever cooked for him against his will? Perhaps under the condition that you'd continue to do so until he told you he liked it?" *Where on earth did you pull that guess from, Kiryu-san?! You pretty much hit the nail on the head! You were so*

right, you didn't even need to bother clarifying that it was conjecture!

“An amusing theory. Tell me—did you really believe that I, Myourenji Renge, would allow myself to be subjected to such mockery and back down without protest?”

“R-Renge-san?” I stammered.

“Kiryu-san, I hereby challenge you to a contest of cookery! We'll determine once and for all who is better suited to nurse Kou back to health!”

“Are you *kidding* me?! What kind of shonen manga development is *that?!?*” Renge was both the challenger *and* the guaranteed loser! I didn't know whether Kiryu could cook at all, of course, but Renge was a cheftastrophe among cheftastrophes. She was a downright prodigy in her field—the god of terrible cooking incarnate. Kiryu could spend the entire contest spacing out in a corner, cook nothing at all, and still win!

“I suppose I should ask you, Kiryu-san,” continued Renge, “how would you estimate your own cooking ability?”

“My parents usually get home late, so I cook for myself on a fairly regular basis.”

“In other words, you're used to cooking for yourself, and *only* yourself. From the sound of things, you've never had anyone else eat your food, have you? I imagine you would've mentioned it if you had.”

“And? What about it?”

“Well, you can't deny that you're a wee bit inexperienced, can you? You see, it's only after someone else has tried your cooking that you come to understand what 'cooking' *truly* means. I almost have to commend you on your recklessness—it's quite something to challenge *me*, lacking in experience as you are!”

“Grr...” Kiryu grimaced. Renge was doing an impressive job of acting like she had an overwhelming advantage, and Kiryu was clearly overwhelmed. That said, when I really thought about it, Renge was the one to challenge *her* in the first place, and Kiryu hadn't even accepted yet. She was just acting as if it was a given that Kiryu would take the bait.

All that said, nothing could change the fact that—and I realize I’m beating a dead horse, here—Renge was a cheftastrophe. She was playing herself up as the sort of mid-game boss you’re railroaded into losing against no matter how you fight it, but her own defeat was already set in stone. She was confidently leaping directly into a pit trap that wasn’t even hidden. It would’ve been hilarious if it weren’t so pathetic.

“H-Hey, we don’t have to make it into a contest, right? This is getting out of hand!”

“I understand, Kou. You’re trying to spare Kiryu from a humiliating defeat.”

“That, but for you!” *Is she following the conversation at all?! Or is she just that much of a sore loser?!*

“All right. Fine.”

“Kiryu?!”

“I accept your challenge, and I’ll be putting my all into it!”

“No, seriously, you don’t have to! Boil up some cup noodles, and you’ll have already won! Hell, you don’t even have to boil them! You could win by feeding them to me dry!” But my snappy retort was in vain. The two of them were in complete battle-manga mode, facing each other down like fated rivals going into an epic duel. I could practically see the sparks crackling between them.

They were actually quite similar when it came to their competitive nature—in fact, they played off each other really nicely in that respect. There was pretty much no way I could stop them after letting them rile each other up that much.



“Where should we get ingredients?” asked Kiryu, glancing at my empty fridge.

“They’ll be arriving shortly,” replied Renge. I, meanwhile, was resolving myself to give up and prepare for the worst. *I’ve been through worse predicaments than this without dying plenty of times! I’ll be just fine this time too. I think. Probably. Maybe. Hopefully.* As I was sinking into those tragic depths of resignation, though, I felt a presence on the other side of my door. A person—a man, most likely, and one with a fairly large build, best as I could tell.

This is weird. My instincts for that sort of thing had dulled significantly since I returned to this world. I was virtually never able to sense people with that sort of clarity, and let’s not forget that I was still in pretty terrible shape. And yet, somehow, I could feel the mystery man beyond the door grab its knob as clearly as if I were doing it myself.

Then he cracked the door open. I *knew* that Renge had locked it behind her, but it clicked open without the slightest resistance. Just like I *knew* I’d met the mystery man before, *somewhere*. But just as that premonition flashed through my mind, he spoke up in a deep, booming voice.

“What’s this? Oh me, oh my!”

“What?!”

“And who might you be?”

Kiryu and Renge immediately went on guard, and I was barely an instant behind them. Actually, “an instant” might even be overselling it. I remembered that voice, and I remembered the greasy face that peeked through the crack. Of course I did—I’d only just met him recently.

“Wh-Why’re you here?!”

“You know this person, Kunugi-kun?” questioned Kiryu.

“I have to say, he strikes me as rather...disagreeable,” added Renge.

He pushed the door all the way open, and I was ever so slightly relieved to find that he was at least clothed this time. The buttons on his dress shirt looked as though they might pop off at any moment, and his slacks resembled a pair of ham shanks, but he was actually wearing rather formal attire, more or less.

Unfortunately, he was also absolutely dripping with sweat. He stepped into the room and looked right at me.

“It’s been quite some time, Kunughi Koh.”

For a moment I was struck speechless, but I finally replied, “Wouldn’t have minded if it’d been even longer. Like, say, forever. And who invited you in? I can *feel* my security deposit draining away with every step you take, so get the hell outta here!”

“Oh, just *look* at you, flanked by a pair of lovely ladies! I *must* say, I’m *ever* so jealous!” Even the way he spoke was somehow slimy. It hit me that I’d never heard him really *talk*, before that moment. Even more impactful was the horrifying realization that he somehow actually *knew about me*.

“So, what, did you break out of prison?”

“Oh, perish the thought! They never caught me in the first place.”

“Prison...?” interjected Kiryu. “Kunugi-kun, how exactly do you know this person?”

“Kiryu, Renge, watch out for that guy! He’s a genuine, real-life criminal degenerate!”

“So he’s one of your friends after all?”

“I’m not a degenerate!” I have to admit, I was a bit impressed that Kiryu had the guts to crack a joke under that sort of circumstance. It *really* wasn’t funny, but she almost certainly wasn’t as aware as I was of how deep his degeneracy ran, so I let it slide.

The obese, besuited man standing before me—in other words, the perverted old man who once chased Ayase Hikari around town stark naked (real name: unknown)—was smiling amiably, but there was an unpleasant, revolting quality to that expression. He slowly plodded towards me.

“I’m afraid I must ask that you not take a single step closer!” declared Renge.

“Well, isn’t *your* chest just out of this world, little missy! You have the body of a supermodel, really!”

“Ugh!”

Ugh. There could hardly be a more fitting word to express the disgust the man prompted. He *loomed*, licking his chops like a hyena closing in on a wounded wildebeest, and Renge quickly stepped away from him.

“Oh, and of course we have *another* well-endowed lady to think about as well... But I suppose I should finish what I came here for, first.”

“You’re not finishing *anything*, and I won’t let you lay a finger on either of them!” I shouted.

“Oh my, no need to be so frightened! I just came to pay you a visit, that’s all. See? I even brought a get-well gift!” The man had been holding *something* behind his back, and he finally produced it. It was a fruit—a round, frighteningly spiky one.

“I-Is that a...?”

“A durian...?” Renge finished my sentence for me. I knew about those things. You might think they’re something like overgrown chestnuts at first glance, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. The truth is that they’re a stunningly lethal ordinance. Indeed: the durian, the so-called king of fruits, is nothing more or less than a fruit-shaped projectile weapon.

“That’s right! A durian! Geh heh heh, I thought that I might pound it into Koh-san’s skull as a little bit of payback for the time he kicked me in the gut as hard as he could, but then I had a better idea...” The man sneered. It was a different sort of grin than the sleazy, lascivious one he’d worn just a moment before—this one was malicious. He grasped the durian with both hands.

“No—you *wouldn’t!*”

“Time to explore a whole new world!”

He mercilessly, ruthlessly crushed the durian with his bare hands. The fruit’s most potent and unique trait dominated the room in an instant: its terrible, overwhelming stench. Kiryu and Renge retched in unison.

“Oh me, oh my, I just *love* those expressions, girls! Seeing you overwhelmed by stank is absolutely *exhilarating!* Incidentally, I happen to be one of those people whose sweat just reeks, and it’s the strangest thing—the smell of the durian cancels the smell of my sweat right out! Fancy that!”

“What kind of messed-up way to deodorize is that?! And it’s not *canceling* your stench out; it’s *overwhelming* it with an even worse one!”

“Oh my, I see *you* weren’t hit especially hard by it at all. At least it was super effective on the ladies, I suppose.” He wasn’t exaggerating. Kiryu and Renge were both hunched down, noses plugged. The smell was so overwhelming it was literally bringing tears to their eyes.

“Just try to touch them, you son of a bitch! I’ll kill your ass before you even get close!”

“Oooh, I’m *scawed*! But, you see...I don’t plan on doing a thing to them. No, not to *them*.” The man shoved his hand (still absolutely covered in chunky, sticky durian gunk) into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle, the contents of which he gulped down in an instant.

“Bweh heh heh!”

Suddenly, he was holding my head between his hands with terrific—no, *abnormal* strength. I didn’t have the time to analyze what was happening, though. His face grew closer, and closer...and before I could process anything at all, I felt a distressing softness on my lips. His face dominated my entire field of vision.

“Mnnghhh?!”

The perverted old man...kissed me on the lips.

I let out an incoherent, muffled moan of shock and horror. I could hear Kiryu and Renge shouting my name, as well, but they sounded incredibly far away—like they were shouting from an entirely different world. His arms were incredibly firm and hardened up like plaster the instant he got a grip on me. I couldn’t budge an inch.

H-Help me...

Aaah, jeez. I felt like I was about to break down in tears. Why did I have to get kissed by some gross, greasy old sex offender in a room that smelled like death while Kiryu and Renge both watched in stunned silence?

Is this...what I deserve? I could think of plenty of ways in which I'd earned that sort of horrific punishment. I'd committed more than my fair share of sins. But that didn't mean that I had to accept the indescribable humiliation that I was going through lying down! I mean, sure, it wouldn't make for much of a punishment if I *were* able to accept it without protest, but that's neither here nor there.

Actually, wait. If this *is* punishment for my sins, then fine, I can live with that. But I sure as hell can't come up with any reason why *this* degenerate asshole has any right to be the one to punish me!

He's the one who's assaulted people! *He's* the one who decided to wander around town in the nude first thing in the morning, inflicting deep and lasting psychological trauma on Hikari, and in turn, me! And now, at this very moment, *he's* the one who's dealing another blow to my mental health that makes the first one pale in comparison!

Hikari isn't around, sure, but in status-ailment terms, he's just inflicted a lethal toxin effect on me. *Again!* This makes *twice*, dammit, and that's a very generous assessment that doesn't take into account all the problems his actions have indirectly led to! And I'm supposed to just sit down and take it?!

Suddenly, I was floating. Well, not literally—it just felt that way, on account of the man letting me go and allowing me to fall backward onto my futon.

“Geh heh heh, and with that, I've accomplished my objective. I'll be taking my leave!” The man made a show of wiping his mouth, then turned his back on me. I didn't say a word and just watched him walk away in silence.

I felt *strange*. My whole body felt like it had those pins and needles you get when your limbs fall asleep, and my thought process was a jumbled mess, but I knew one thing with absolute certainty. I was *enraged*.

“That...”

My lips were trembling. I was having trouble speaking clearly. But my body felt like it was aflame.

“That was...”

I wasn't suddenly engulfed in a blazing golden aura of rage or anything of the sort, but I *was* somehow miraculously rejuvenated. It was like I hadn't been suffering from debilitating mana-drain in the first place. My adrenaline glands were probably pumping their whatever-juice into my brainpipes, or however the hell that works. I was experiencing the superhuman rush that stems from utter disaster and desperation. Like how a candle burns brightest right before it goes out.

But really, none of that mattered. All that mattered was the rage that swept me away as I took a long, deep breath, then shouted with every ounce of force I could muster.

“THAT WAS MY FIRST KISS, GODDAMMIIIIIIIT!!!”

Okay. That was a little satisfying. *Just* a little. But the roiling fury was still growing within me. *I bet I'd feel even more satisfied if I punched a certain someone into the next dimension!*

“I-I hope you're not being serious, Kunugi-kun...?” stammered Kiryu.

“Wait—really? Is that true, Kou?” said Renge, following her up. Both of them looked like they really sympathized with my plight...but I pretended not to notice as I leapt to my feet. My body felt light, somehow. The man was long gone, but in this state, I had a feeling that I could catch up to him in no time. *Is this the power of rage? If so, then damn, rage is really something!*

“K-Kunugi-kun,” stammered Kiryu once more, “I think we can all agree that, umm, that definitely didn't count as your first! Isn't that right, Miss President?”

“Yes, absolutely! Kou, the best thing to do at times like these is to forget about it and move on. My mother and father kissed me all the time when I was little, but I never even considered the possibility that *those* would count as my first kiss! Right?”

They were really trying their best to make me feel better, but I couldn't contain my fury and broke into a sprint. I heard them shouting my name behind me, but I was gone in a jiffy. I wouldn't be satisfied until I punched that old man *right* in the kisser. The only doubt in my mind was about whether or not one

punch would be good enough on its own.

The night was young, and the chase was on.

Of Monster Girls and Middle-Aged Perverts

I barely managed to throw my shoes on and sprinted out into the city streets, still wearing the same wrinkled school uniform I'd never bothered to change out of the day before. The old man was nowhere to be seen, but I knew I could chase him down anyway.

"He's gonna regret smashing that durian when I'm done with him..."

I could still faintly pick up its acrid stench in the air. Some of that was coming from me, of course, but I could distinguish our respective trails. That whole thing was weird, though—almost unnatural. Why would he go out of his way to stink us up with a durian...? *No, overthinking this would be pointless.* I could save all those doubts for *after* I caught him and beat the stuffing out of him.

As I sprinted through the streets, I caught no small number of people turning to look at me in reaction to my durian stench. I sorta felt like a celebrity. None of them tried to talk to me, of course—actually, pretty much all of them went out of their way to avoid me, which made running all the easier.

The sunset had wrapped up its daily business, and the sky was well on its way to darkness. I would've liked to catch him before night fell entirely, but that was probably already out of the question. I could tell from his smell and the dim sense I still had of him that the old dude was moving at a pretty rapid pace. Faster than I could actually imagine him running, considering his build.

I wasn't worried, though. My body's engine was gassed up, and I knew for a fact it wouldn't lose to his. Not only had I fully recovered from my mana-drain-induced weakness, I felt better than I had in a very long time.

"Oh, hey! That you, A-senpai?"

"Huh? Was it just me, or did I just hear someone I know...? Meh, probably just me."

Before long, the old man's trail had led me into a fairly abandoned part of

town. There wasn't a person to be seen. I couldn't say whether he was avoiding people on purpose or whether people were avoiding *him* on purpose, thus clearing the way by the time I passed through (again, the durian thing), but in any case, it definitely wasn't the sort of situation where somebody I knew would be trying to talk to me.

“Heeey, Senpai! C'mon, don't ignore me!”

“Again! Maybe I wasn't imagining it...? Wait, whoa?!”



Before I knew it, a girl in a tracksuit was running alongside me. Part of me still assumed she was a hallucination, and I reached out towards her on impulse. I couldn't even begin to guess about her thought process at that moment, but for whatever reason she grabbed my hand, and we ended up exchanging a mid-sprint handshake. Meaning I touched her; meaning she was real.

"Kazuki? What're you doing here?!"

It was indeed Kazuki Rena, a kouhai of mine at Oumei High and ace of the track team. We went to the same school, so it made sense that we'd seen each other, but by all rights a no-clubber like me wouldn't come into contact with her much at all. We had one other point of contact, though: my best friend, who also happened to be her first love. We'd talked a few times on account of that. Actually, we'd just talked about how she'd given up on said first love pretty darn recently, and things were definitely a bit awkward between us as a result.

"I'm doing some road running! Are you working out too, Senpai? Talk about a coincidence! I'll run with you!"

"Sorry, who're you talking to right now?!"

"My senpai! Duuuh!"

"Then don't you think you should, I dunno, *ask*?! Respect your elders, lady!"

"You think? But we're talking about *running*! You don't need words to communicate with a fellow runner!"

"So what, you ambush every other runner you happen to come across?"

"Aha ha ha, you're such a kidder! I don't think I'm *ambushing* anyone, really. And besides, I only talk to people who're running at my pace! Running with a slowpoke would really mess up my rhythm."

"You can be pretty harsh, huh...?" *I guess that's only to be expected from a girl who's famous in the track-and-field world on a national level.* Supposedly, bigwigs in the business had great expectations for her future.

"And on that subject, you're actually the first person I've talked to like this!"

"Yeah *right*!"

“No, for real, totally serious! And speaking of, you’re running at a real nice pace, Senpai! You should’ve told me you could run like this sooner!” Kazuki grinned as she ran beside me, looking pleased yet laid-back in spite of the sweat that was dripping down her face. We *were* actually running at a really notable speed. There wasn’t anyone else around to compare it to, but most likely, we were moving faster than most people could pedal a bike. In that sense, Kazuki and I were both solidly abnormal.

Could it be? Is my mana back?

Using mana had been like breathing for me back when I was a Hero. I couldn’t actually cast magic with it in any real capacity, of course, but I could channel it to enhance my physical abilities. Ever since I returned to this world, though, I’d been unable to refresh my mana reserves. My gas tank was stuck on empty in perpetuity, and my physical abilities were dropped down to a normal human level (albeit an abnormally well-trained one). I fit into the average high school student framework to the bitter end.

Plus, I’d only just recently used my magic in spite of being in that mana-less state, and I’d been completely incapacitated by the backlash! And yet there I was, running along at that ridiculous pace without even feeling especially tired. The logical conclusion was that, somehow, my mana had been replenished.

But, how? And when...?

“Senpai? Lost in thought? Guess this is pretty easy for you after all!”

“Like you’re one to talk—do you know how fast you’re running? It’s unbelievable!” With my mana recovered, I’d regained my former superhuman physical abilities, and yet Kazuki was keeping up with me like it was nothing. I wondered for a moment if she was in the same sort of position as me, but I wasn’t sensing any sort of magic vibes from her at all. In other words, she was genuinely, naturally that fast. *Is this girl really even human?*

“Sounds like you’re makin’ fun of me,” she replied. “I’m going pretty all out, for the record! This is the first time since I got into high school that I’ve felt like I might lose! Actually, make that the first time, period!”

“You sound, uhh, pretty happy about that.”

“Well, duh! It’s the first time I’ve found someone who can actually compete with me! I always thought that the only person I’d ever get to try and exceed was myself!”

“*Oof*, yup, sounding like a real prodigy there!” That sounds like the sort of thing you’d accidentally alienate your best friend by saying in middle school! They’d get snippy and be all “you’ll meet someone faster than you in no time!” But regardless, *my* speed was more or less a cheat. By this world’s standards I was effectively doping, and her ecstatic smile made me feel profoundly guilty.

“Hey, Senpai, why not join the track team? If you can run like *this*, you’ll do great things for the team, no question about it! The two of us could team up and aim for the top of the track-and-field world together!”

“Are there even any track events that let guys and girls team up?”

“I dunno, three-legged race?”

“That’s a field day event!”

“Let’s aim for the top of our school’s field days together!”

“Are you really okay with scaling down your ambitions like that?” Bantering with her was throwing my mind way off track. I didn’t have the time to be chattering like that in the first place. My first priority was to catch the old man, beat the ever-loving crap out of him and take vengeance for my first kiss! I felt a bit bad for Kazuki, but accomplishing that goal meant speeding up. My magically enhanced abilities would blink out the second my mana was exhausted, and I had to catch him before I hit that time limit.

“Oooh, picking up the pace, eh? All right, I like it! Let’s do this!”

It did not go as planned. I figured I could pull away from her, but she let out a carefree shout and kept pace with me perfectly.

“Okay, seriously, what the hell’s your deal?!”

“Man, you’re really something, Senpai! Here I am, thinking that I’m getting used to your pace, and you speed up at the perfect moment!”

“I didn’t do it for *you*!” I couldn’t tell how fast we were going, but it *felt* like we could race a car. I could feel myself closing in on my target, too. But then

there was Kazuki.

“Oh wow, the wind feels *great!*” She closed her eyes and shouted with rapturous glee. She accused me of taking it easy earlier, but it felt like she was having an even easier time than I was. “Oh, by the way, Senpai?”

I hesitated. *What now?* “Yeah?”

“Don’t suppose you’d mind if I ask you what your name is?”

Two largely contradictory thoughts flashed through my head simultaneously: *Wow, that was abrupt,* and *It took her this long to ask?!* “Why’re you asking this now?”

“Cause I need your name to fill out the club registration form.”

“You’re planning on making me join the track team by force?!”

“Duh! I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if I let someone with legs like yours get left by the wayside! I’d be doing a disservice to all the track-and-field fans all around the world!”

“Then I guess you’d better be ready for some sleep deprivation!” Probably quite a lot of it, considering just how many fans there were all around the world. If making sure I didn’t get forced out of a rom-com world and into a sports drama one meant that Kazuki had to become an insomniac, then so be it.

The idea was even less appealing considering that extras in sports dramas are well known to have it incredibly rough, even by sidekick standards. They have to show up to their club just as often as the main-character squad and go through all the same stupidly brutal training, but somehow they still never seem to get any screen time! And it goes without saying that they absolutely *never* end up on the field during games, so they never get the chance to show off the fruits of their labor.

The only time they have *any* presence is when they’re on the bench during the big-game scenes and get to shout out the names of the main-character squad’s special moves. The only exception’s when the series is about to wrap up, and they get to take the field for a single brief, fleeting moment. It’s like a cameo appearance—nobody actually cares if they do well or not, and it’s over an instant later.

In other words: intense overtime, no pay, and zero work satisfaction. It'd be like going to work for the most disgustingly exploitative corporation imaginable. Like *hell* was I gonna let myself end up as one of *those* background characters!

"C'mon, join the club; it'll be fun! And tell me your name while you're at it!"

"What, so getting my name's an afterthought?"

"Maybe I'm just too shy to admit that's what I really want!"

"You don't have a shy bone in your body."

"Oh, you realized?" Kazuki was smiling as simplymindedly as ever, but by that point her face was drenched with sweat, and her breathing was wild and strained. I was in pretty much the same boat. Again: I, the guy who was doped up on mana, was having just as hard a time as she was. *Where the hell does this chick hide all that energy in that small frame of hers? It's a real mystery.*

"I can imagine so many wild possibilities if you did join, though! Like, first, we'll cram in *so much* training before finals we won't even have time to sleep! Then, after summer vacation starts, we'll have a hellish summer training camp waiting for us, and we can even hole up in the mountains together for more training after that! Like, y'know, one of those ten-day wilderness survival excursions!"

"I'd love to meet the guy who could listen to *that* pitch and decide that joining sounds like a good idea!" *How would she even know about the hellish training camp thing? She's still a first-year; she can't have gone through one of those yet!* On the other hand, considering the side of her I was seeing at that moment, I could easily imagine her *turning* it into hell for the other club members without breaking a sweat.

"Huh...?" Suddenly, the smell...stopped? Not in the sense that it stopped smelling—it was growing stronger and stronger, actually, in a manner that could only make me conclude that the man had stopped, and I was closing in on him.

"Sorry, Kazuki, but no more time to chat. I've gotta move." I'd ended up getting pulled into the conversation, but I hadn't forgotten my actual objective. I felt a bit bad about doing this to Kazuki, but it was time for me to sprint at full speed. I figured that an obsessive track maniac like her would end up taking

that defeat and turning it into motivation, anyway. She'd be fine.

“Whoa?! Hey, Senpai?!” I heard her shout with shock behind me, but I accelerated in a flash and left her in the dust, running at a speed that nobody my age could possibly manage, no matter how all-out they went. Well, not in this world, anyway.

My final destination ended up being a fenced-off construction site. They were going to put up an apartment building there, best I could tell; it was an empty lot in a desolate neighborhood about five stations away from Meiou City. He stood in the center of the lot: a portly man in a suit, back turned to me like he was the final boss of a dungeon. The sun had completely set at that point and the lot was pitch black, but I knew in an instant that it was him and made the obvious first move.

“Geh heh heh! So you made it, Kunughi Kobphhaugh?!?!?”

"DIIIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

I dropkicked him in the head. You better believe I put all the momentum of my sprint into it, too, and blew him most of the way across the lot. He bounced along the ground like a soccer ball. In fact, I hit him so hard that I'd almost worried about accidentally killing him, but considering our interactions up to that point he definitely wasn't a normal person, and I was pretty sure he'd be fine.

“Heh heh heh... You certainly have a funny way of greeting people.” As expected, he stood up like nothing had happened at all. I could just make out his silhouette through the dust cloud raised by his impact. “I’m glad to see you’re back in top condition. Forcing you to drink *this* was worth the effort.”

He pulled the bottle from before out of his pocket again. That confirmed my suspicions—he'd force-fed it to me, and whatever it was, it had allowed me to recover my mana. Apparently, that was all according to plan for him.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Your partner for your first kiss, of course!” He pressed his fingers up to his lips, obviously provoking me.

“Oh, you are so dead!” I’d managed to cool off a bit thanks to my

conversation with Kazuki, but all of a sudden I was filled with rage all over again. *He walked off that first kick like it was nothing—nobody would blame me if I gave him a couple more for good measure, right...?*

“I was long gone by then, but you shouted so loudly I heard you anyway. In any case, no need to worry—it was *my* first kiss too.”

“I don’t give a crap!” *Oh god, that first kiss shout was loud enough for people outside to hear it?! This sucks!* Knowing it was also *his* first just made the situation suck even harder. Nobody would be proud of exchanging first kisses with a greasy, middle-aged degenerate! Hell, that’s the exact opposite of reassuring! It’s a social time bomb that’ll explode the minute anyone finds out about this nightmare!

“Heh heh heh, oh, pwease, don’t be so angwy!” he snickered. “I’m sure you realize that bloodshed’s frowned upon in this world, don’tcha?”

“‘This world’... I knew it—you too?”

“That’s right. I came here from the same world as you—from that fantasy land of swords and sorcery, as they say in these parts.” He admitted it immediately and easily. Apparently, he’d had no intention of hiding it in the first place.

“What’re you after? Why would you—”

“Why would I try to assault the lovely little lady from before?” He cut me off, sneering as he predicted my line of questioning. It wasn’t the gross, sleazy grin from before. This was something altogether different.

“You didn’t *try* to assault her; you *did* assault her!”

“If I’d actually been trying, do you really believe she would have been able to escape? I wasn’t after her, Kunughi Koh. I was after *you*.”

“Me...?”

“You’ve gone soft, but I had a feeling that making contact with *her* would spur you to action.” *Her*—he emphasized the word in a weird way that really got my attention. It almost felt like he wasn’t really talking about Ayase at all. “Wait, really?” he continued. “You haven’t noticed?”

“Noticed what?”

“About the girl! Ayase Hikari is—” His words cut off mid-sentence. *Hikari’s what? If you weren’t going after her out of pure perversion, why were you chasing her...?* I waited for him to finish his thought, but he didn’t. We just stood there, silently.

“I’m waiting?”

“I’m aware, but...who is *that*?” His style of speech suddenly shifted—he sounded a bit stiffer than he had up until that moment. It seemed to me that he’d been caught somewhat off guard, and I had to wonder if *that* was how he talked normally.

More importantly, though, who is “that”? His gaze was fixed on a point behind me, and I turned to look, though I took great care to make sure not to let my guard down. I couldn’t let him get the jump on me while I was distracted. I spotted “that” immediately: Kazuki, crouched down and holding her tracksuit’s jacket in front of her as if it’d help her blend in. *Who does she think she is, a ninja?*

“What’re you doing over there?” I called out.

“Ah, you knew I was watching?” she responded.

“Nope! Honestly, didn’t notice at all. Kinda freaking out here.” Seriously, it felt like my heart just about leapt out through my mouth the moment I noticed her. Thankfully, I managed to hold back a yelp, which helped preserve what very little dignity I had left. Kazuki, meanwhile, abandoned all pretense of stealth the moment she was discovered. She slung her jacket over her shoulder and smiled as she walked up to me.

“I can’t believe you left me behind like that, Senpai!” She pouted. “You’ve got this really weird smell on you today, though, so I managed to follow you anyway.” The old guy’s durian might’ve let me track him, but apparently it also lured Kazuki right to us.

“You know that means it’s *your* fault she’s here, right? This is more complicated than ever because you just *had* to go and blow up a damn durian in my apartment!”

“I do believe you’re trying to pass the buck to me.”

“Can’t pass the buck to someone who already has it! Why the *hell* did you have a durian in the first place?! Were you trying to harass me, or what?!”

He paused. “Just a touch of humor.”

“It’s not friggin’ funny!” If barging into a sick person’s house uninvited, splattering a durian all over their room, and forcing a kiss on them counts as “humor,” then our society needs to start making laws to keep the comics of the world in check! *Urge to kill: rapidly rising! I bet the price of rage is going through the roof in my internal stock market!*

“Would a watermelon have been better? They *are* in season.”

“One: not the problem; two: why a watermelon; and three: of *course* that’d be better! Hello?!” Something about his blockheaded, fundamentally nonsensical sense of humor reminded me of one of my old party members back in the other world. *He* was a handsome man with a perpetually surly look on his face, though, and just the thought of comparing him to this disgusting old pervert made me want to snap on the spot and beat the crap out of him.

“Anyway,” I said, changing the subject, “how long were you listening, Kazuki?”

“Huh...? Ah, not long! I just got here, yup!”

“Look me in the eye and say that again.” She couldn’t. In fact, absolutely everything about her body language screamed dishonesty. “Kazuki?”

“L-Like I said, I didn’t hear anythi— Eek?!” I sandwiched her face between my palms and forced her to look me in the eye. She froze up, tried her best to look away, then gave up and finally met my gaze. “Umm, so... I started listening around the time you were saying something about having your first kiss with that guy over there.”

“That was basically the very beginning!”

“I-I’m not the type to judge, y’know?! If you’re, umm, into people like him, that’s fine by me! I’ve heard that sort of thing’s considered totally normal in other parts of the world these days!”

“Nooo! He forced it on me! Right?!”

“Wh-Why are you bringing me into this?!”

“Isn’t it obvious?! Back me up here! It’s your fault we’re even having this misunderstanding!”

“Ugh... I suppose so.” He didn’t look satisfied with the situation, but he nodded in agreement and turned to face Kazuki. “Young lady?”

“Y-Yeah?”

“I’m a woman.”

“Like hell you are!” I screeched. “Oh my *god*, if you were gonna lie, you could’ve at least *tried* to come up with a believable one!”

“Oh, you’re a lady! Wow, yeah, I totally misunderstood this whole thing. Sorry about that.”

“*She bought it?!* ” If he tried that line on ten random people, I could basically guarantee that all ten of them would call him out on it, but Kazuki accepted it without a second thought. I had seriously mixed feelings about the whole matter, but she’d just accepted the situation as totally normal, for whatever reason, and I didn’t feel like pushing my luck.

“By the way—Senpai?”

“Yeah?”

“What was all that ‘fantasy land of swords and sorcery’ stuff about?”

AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!!!!!!!

Oh god, that’s right! She was listening from the very start! That means she heard all of the conversation, including those bits! I reflexively glared at the old man, and he shot me a “boy, just look at the mess you’ve gotten us into, she totally heard us” look in return. *How is this my fault?!*

“Then there was that stuff about the world, and about him assaulting someone, and something about Ayase Hikari-chan... I didn’t really get most of it, to be honest.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t, and you’re better off that way. Trust me. Just go home, have a nice evening, and go to bed.”

“No way! I’m waaay too curious to sleep!” She seemed really excited. *Is she enjoying this?* The old man and I exchanged a glance with each other. We wouldn’t be on glance-exchanging terms under normal circumstances, but we shared a single common opinion: having a serious conversation would be *impossible* with her around.

“I’ll explain it all later, okay?”

“Aww, c’moon...”

“Allow me, young lady. We were discussing a video game.” I completely failed to come up with an excuse that would convince her and was verbally flailing, but the old guy stepped up to do so instead.

“A video game?”

“Yes, that’s right. The two of us play the same online game together, and our discussion just happened to get a touch heated.”

For something he came up with on the spot, it was honestly a pretty solid lie. “Swords and sorcery” did describe a majority of that sort of game’s settings, after all. Kazuki didn’t look like the sort of girl who would have much know-how when it came to games, but as long as she was vaguely aware of their existence, she’d probably get the gist of it.

“But what about the kissing thing?”

“That’s a game mechanic.”

“And the thing about assaulting a girl to get at Senpai?”

“An event in the game.”

“I thought I heard you mention Ayase Hikari-chan, though...?”

“‘Ayase...Hikari’? You must have misheard something.”

“Oh, okay. I guess that makes sense.” It sorta fell apart at the end, but Kazuki gave a satisfied nod anyway. *This old dude’s more of a fast-talker than I expected him to be...*

“Oh, can I ask one more question?”

“What?” I replied.

“Why do both of you smell so *bad*?”

We froze. The construction site fell into deathly silence. I still didn’t even understand why he’d felt the need to blow up a durian with his bare hands in the first place, and thanks to that incredibly random decision, both of us reeked of that distinctive week-old-garbage smell. It was so horrifyingly pungent, I was sort of astonished that Kazuki hadn’t already fled in disgust.

There was *no* way he could write off the stench as part of the game. At the rate things were going, it seemed inevitable that we’d be filed together in her mind as partners in stench, and I didn’t want to be thought of as *any* sort of partner with that lunatic!

“It’s because of the game.”

“Seriously, dude?!“ How the hell does he think he’s gonna spin this?! Kazuki might be a pretty dim bulb, but she’s not burnt out!

“The more you play this particular game, the more you end up emitting this scent. The two of us are hopelessly afflicted.”

“O-Oh, wow, that game’s crazy! I’ve heard that video games have been getting super advanced lately, but I didn’t know they could even make *smells*!”

“You believed me?!“ This time it was the old man’s turn to be horrified by her credulity, in spite of the fact that he’s the one who came up with the excuse in the first place.

“Well, y’know, I don’t really know much about anything other than track and field... Wait, you were kidding?”

He hesitated for just a moment, then replied. “N-No. I was completely serious. Video games are really something these days.”

“Thought so! I know, right?!“ She was so stupid, it was almost cute. I mean, she was cute to begin with (it comes with the heroine territory), but still. “Well, it still feels like you two have some real beef with each other. Are you fighting? Even though you both play the same game?”

“F-Fighting?” I stammered. “Nah, we’re not really—”

“Yes, that’s right, young lady.” Suddenly, something about the old man’s aura changed. His words were laced with anger, and that anger was very distinctly directed towards me.

He’s not seriously planning on having this conversation right in front of her?!
“Hey, don’t even think about it!” I warned, to no avail.

“You see, he gave up on the game halfway through. Some of us tried to be understanding, to let him go—but not *all* of us could be so accepting...” He was smiling, but there wasn’t so much as a hint of amity in his voice. The contrast between his expression and tone was so stark, even Kazuki seemed a bit frightened, grabbing on to the hem of my uniform. “That’s why I came to see him. To bring him back. To make him play the ‘game’ with *us* once more.”

“The game...” He obscured the true meaning of his words in a metaphor on account of Kazuki’s presence. *I* knew that he was a denizen of that other world, and with that fact in mind, he could only mean one thing.

“I’m an outsider, so I’m not really sure it’s my place to talk,” piped up Kazuki, “but, I mean, everyone’s got their own reasons for playing games and quitting them, right...?”

“Yes, you’re quite right. You *are* an outsider, so you’d never understand. You can’t appreciate how serious we ‘game-folk’ are. You can’t imagine how sincerely we live our lives, and how difficult it was to accept it when he tossed us away like we were nothing.”

“Ugh...” Kazuki bowed to the pressure of his words. It was starting to get to me as well—I was sweating, and not as a result of my recent sprint. It was a cold, clammy sweat that clung unpleasantly to my skin.

“In our eyes, he was...the protagonist, I suppose. And a story can’t progress if the protagonist goes missing. Far from it—without him around, it’s only a matter of time before the villain he’s fated to defeat drives the world to ruin.”

Protagonist. The word lingered in my mind.

I’m no protagonist, not even close! I’m a sidekick, a best friend, an extra...but

those are all titles of my own creation. They're nothing more than a story I engineered to protect myself while I live in this world.

I wanted to turn this world into my paradise: a somewhat boisterous but peaceful school life rom-com where no blood has to be shed, where nobody has to die. *Nobody*.

"I'm no protagonist..."

"Senpai?"

"Oh, but you are!" the man continued. "Maybe not in this world...but in *that* one, there's no question about it."

"Ugh..." I couldn't deny it. I didn't have the right to. The fact that I'd been the protagonist led to so many things being stolen away from so many people—I couldn't turn a blind eye to that.

I was the protagonist, so Rei and Lyra died. I was the protagonist, so I had to kill Balrog with my own two hands... That wasn't even the end of it. My very existence warped the lives of countless people, more than I knew, and yet I abandoned that responsibility. I ran from it—all the way to another world.

The man before me knew all of that. That's why he engineered events so that Ayase and I would meet. He probably also knew that I'd project my memories of Rei onto Ayase, and that I would try to erase *her* memories of *me* as a result. I'd been dancing in the palm of his hand since the very beginning, and in doing so, he'd proven to me that in the end, I'll never *belong* in this world. No matter how much I aspire to be the comic relief in a story that's bigger than me, it'll never happen. I'll never be able to support someone like that. I'll never be able to make people happy—

"You're not a protagonist, Senpai."

Suddenly, Kazuki spoke up from beside me—she spoke to *me*.

"I mean, how could you be? You're Ayase-senpai's Friend A, right?" she said with a smile. An innocent smile, pure and naive, without so much as a tinge of

malice to be seen. “I’ve never met anyone else who’d introduce themselves like that! You didn’t even tell me your real name! You’ve been Ayase-senpai’s Friend A-senpai to me since the day we met, and what kinda protagonist would have a name like that?”

“I believe I told you that you’re an outsider?” interjected the man, spitefully.

“I mean, I’m not gonna *get* the whole ‘game’ thing, no matter how much I think about it. I haven’t even played it! But if we’re talking worlds, then in my book, there are as many of ‘em out there as there are people and as many protagonists as there are worlds. Like, track and field’s a whole world for me, and it’s not even my only one! I’m the protagonist in my own track world, but I could never take on a leading role when it comes to an academic one.”

“What on earth are you talking about...?”

“Umm, yeah, sorry. I’m not even sure I totally get it, myself... I guess what I’m trying to say’s that Senpai might be the protagonist of that game’s world in your mind, but it might not be that important to *him*! He has his own worlds that’re totally different from yours, so I don’t think it makes sense for him to let what anyone else says shoehorn him into a role he doesn’t want!” she concluded with a grin.

She was probably speaking off the cuff, and it wasn’t a logical, structured argument in the slightest. In fact, it was all just her completely subjective opinion. And yet somehow, hearing her say those words made the pressure that’d been building within my chest drain away.

“That said, you’ve jumped up the character rankings for Rena-chan’s Super Track Tale pretty majorly tonight, Senpai! I’m not giving up the protagonist title, though!”

“Kazuki...”

“You’ve got your own world to live in, Senpai, so I think you should live your life like you... Huh...?” Suddenly, Kazuki staggered forward. She released my uniform and spun unsteadily in place like a wobbly top near the end of its rotation.

“A-Ahhh...”

“Kazuki?!”

A moment later, she fell to the ground. Well, not all the way, thankfully—I managed to catch her right before she landed. She lay there, completely limp, staring blankly into space.

“Hey, Kazuki?! Kazuki!”

“Ha ha,” she replied weakly, “guess I might’ve pushed myself a bit too hard... It’s been ages since I’ve run myself into the ground, and then I did all that thinking on top of it. I’m totally outta gas...”

“S-Seriously...?”

“Umm, one last thing... You’ve got a really nice smile, Senpai, so you should stop scowling like that... Next time we run together, let’s...enjoy it...” With those final words, she fell asleep in my arms. I immediately checked her neck for a pulse and was relieved to find one. She definitely wasn’t dead. From the way she’d talked about it, I’d just accidentally pushed her a lot further than I should’ve.

“Kazuki...” I slowly and gently picked her up, careful not to wake her. *Can’t possibly be comfortable to sleep in my arms, but cut me some slack, girl.* “I was scowling, huh?” Maybe that’s why she stuck with me to the end. And really, the ridiculous exchange I had with her while I was running around did actually help me cool off. Was that all according to her plan?

The thought made me chuckle. A girl—a kouhai, even—who I’d assumed was a total musclehead managed to pull a fast one on me. *I’m kind of a sucker, aren’t I?*

“Koh.”

“Look—I’ve got a thousand reasons to let you have it, but now’s not the time. Can’t exactly fight while I’m carrying someone.”

“So, you agree with her? You’ll accept everything she said, just like that?”

I hesitated. “I know I can’t escape from what happened in that world. I get it. But we’re in *this* world right now. Don’t drag me into that one’s problems.”

“That world is *everything* to me.” The old man—or rather, the person who

looked like an old man—spat the words out with a somewhat defeated tone.

Compared to this world, the one that he and I had lived in was hell on earth. This world had its own problems, of course, but even taking all of them into account, it still felt like paradise to me. I had no idea how he'd managed to pursue me all the way here, but I knew that he wouldn't have gone to the trouble if it didn't mean quite a lot to him.

"Fine. We'll talk about this again one day when I can spare the time." He didn't reply. "I'm just not good at getting mad on my own behalf, in the end. Like, I was so pissed at you I couldn't even believe it just a minute ago, but seeing the ridiculous look on this doofus's sleeping face was enough to totally snap me out of it."

Kazuki was right. I just had to smile. I wasn't particularly into running, but I was very into this world. Maybe I'd choose it, maybe I wouldn't, but I'd make that decision *myself*. After Kazuki ran herself half to death and thought herself most of the rest of the way there, I owed it to her to not take her words lightly.

A moment of silence passed before he answered. "Fine," he said, turning his back to me. "We'll meet again. One day..."

"Works for me. Leave the fat suit at home when you do, though. You're not pulling the look off at all."

"Shut up," he sulkily muttered. He sounded different in that final moment. It wasn't the ridiculously deep voice he'd put on before. He sounded throaty and a bit hoarse. Something about his voice rang a bell, but I couldn't pin it down.

I stayed there until he vanished from eyesight, carrying Kazuki and staring blankly up at the stars.

Your entire world can change in an instant. Somewhere along the way, the daily life I'd been enjoying with all my heart had silently crumbled around me. I hadn't even noticed. But in the end, I'd been the one to deal the killing blow.

I had to deal with Ayase. I had to deal with the man who came all the way from another world to find me. And finally, I had to deal with the deep-seated wounds that lingered in the back of my own mind, festering away without any

hope of healing.

If I wanted to choose a world for myself, I would have to confront all of them head-on.

The Meaning of Family

Later that evening, I let out a long, exhausted yawn as I basked in a piping-hot bathtub. My breath blew wispy patterns in the steam rising out from the water before vanishing into nothingness, and it felt like all my fatigue was dissipating right along with it.

“Is the water hot enough for you, Kou-kun?” called a voice from the other side of the bathroom’s fogged-up glass door.

“Yeah, it’s perfect... Thanks for letting me use your bath...”

“Hee hee, that’s quite all right! Take your time and relax, okay?”

“Yeah, thank you very much...” *Well, that was a pretty inane exchange on my part.* I couldn’t help it, though. Living on my own had turned me into a slovenly shower person, and I virtually never had the time or opportunity to really soak it up in a bath. This was a rare event.

“Not sure if I should really be getting this comfortable here...” The drowned corpses of the little chibi angel and devil that were supposed to be arguing on my shoulders were bobbing up and down in the bathwater, so I was forced to play out my internal conflict single-handedly.

For the sake of understanding that internal conflict, however, I first have to establish how I ended up kicking back and relaxing in a bathtub in a house I’d never been to before while talking with an adult woman I’d only just met. I’m *definitely not* kicking off a flashback to buy myself more rub-a-dub-dub time, for the record!



“Mmnng... I can’t run another step...”

“Oh, great, more played-out sleep-talking...almost. Kinda. Actually, what? Isn’t it supposed to be ‘I can’t eat another bite’?” There was nobody nearby and conscious enough to appreciate my retort, but I went ahead and made it

anyway. Kazuki, asleep on my back, failed to acknowledge my wit. It was well past the time that good boys and girls went to bed, and well into the time when bad boys and girls (plus part-time workers) woke up.

Thankfully, I had both a plan and a destination. I almost panicked at first and was just about ready to take her back to my place when her cell phone rang. The display read “Mom,” and, long story short, I managed to explain the situation and get directions to her house. It was pretty far away, but my own place was equally far in the opposite direction, so I didn’t really gain or lose any time by taking her there.

“Bluhh...”

“Eek?!” I felt a sudden, wet sensation on the back of my neck. Kazuki was drooling on me. I figured that carrying her on my back would look a lot less suspicious than carrying her in my arms, on the off chance somebody noticed us, but I hadn’t considered the possibility that she’d subject me to that sort of attack!

Her assault didn’t let up past that point either. Sometimes she’d squeeze my neck hard enough to half-throttle me, and other times she’d loosen her grip enough to almost fall off my back. It was just one thing after another. I somehow managed to cope with her drowsy offense and follow the directions I’d received to her place.

It turned out to be a perfectly normal single-family home in a perfectly normal residential neighborhood. Kazuki’s family name was written on a plate by the door, so no real ambiguity there, but even if I did have the wrong house somehow, I didn’t especially care. As long as there was a roof overhead, I could just chuck her inside and go home. I rang the doorbell, and a moment later, a voice rang out through the attached intercom.

“Yes, who is it?”

“Umm, It’s Kunugi! We talked on the phone just a little while ago?” I waited, but nobody replied. *I don’t actually have the wrong house, do I?* Just as a tinge of worry was beginning to set in, the front door opened, and a notably attractive woman stepped outside.

“Oh, umm, thanks for coming! Or maybe I should say ‘welcome home’?”

It was the same woman I'd spoken with on the phone. Her slow, somewhat gentle manner of speech was unmistakable. *So this is Kazuki's mother?* She didn't bear much resemblance to her ever-lively daughter, so I presumed that Kazuki must take after her dad instead.

"I'd say 'welcome home' works just fine. Hear that, Kazuki? C'mon, wake up!"

"Oh, I don't think she'll be waking up any time soon. I always have the hardest time getting her up in the mornings!"

"O-Oh, okay."

"Why don't you come inside for now?"

"Huh? Ah, I mean, sure. Thanks..." I couldn't exactly dump her on the doorstep and leave at that point, so I ended up accepting her mother's invitation and walking inside with Kazuki still on my back.

"Hee hee! Welcome home!" She greeted us again as I took off my shoes and put on a pair of slippers. She was talking to Kazuki, obviously, but for just a moment it felt like she was addressing me too. I felt a bit bashful. Then she sniffed me. "Umm, Kou-kun, was it? You smell a little strange..."

"Ah... Sorry 'bout that..." Even after everything that had already happened, the durian was still causing me trouble. I found myself wondering for the umpteenth time why the *hell* that lunatic felt the need to blow one of those up in my room.

"Hmm... Oh, I know! You should take a bath, Kou-kun."

"Huh? Ah, but, I was just here to drop off Kazuki... I mean, to drop off Renasan. I should really—"

"No need to make excuses, just take a bath. Besides, I already made dinner for you after we spoke on the phone. I can't send you home without even thanking you for carrying Rena all the way here!"

"I, err, I mean... I-I guess I'll borrow your tub, then..." She was smiling in a perfectly friendly sort of manner, but at the same time, she had this crazily intimidating presence that made it impossible to refuse. I agreed to stay in spite of myself. I discovered that she had one thing in common with her daughter

after all: they were both really good at packing a variety of widely varied emotions into their smiles.



So, yup, thanks to the old man and his durian, I got to take a bath. Rub-a-dub-dub.

“I’ll leave a change of clothes for you out here, okay, Kou-kun?”

“A change of clothes? I can just wear my uniform home; it’s fine.”

“Your uniform was just as smelly as you were, so I already put it into the washing machine. I’ll run it through the dryer, so it’ll be all ready for you tomorrow morning!”

“Huh? Wait, you mean...?”

“That’s right! You’re staying here tonight!”

Staying...here...? Getting covered in durian gunk ended up causing me to spend the night in a house inhabited by two beautiful women. You might be wondering, “How the hell does that follow?” and frankly, *same. How the hell does that follow?*

“Rena’s clothes might be a touch small on you, though...”

“More than a touch! They wouldn’t fit at all! She’s a year younger than me and a girl on top of it!”

“In that case, I’ll let you borrow some of my husband’s clothes! Oh, my husband’s working away from home at the moment, so don’t let wearing them make you feel uncomfortable, okay?”

“Th-That’s really not the problem here...” She laid out a set of clothes, then left the changing room. I spent a while longer soaking it up in the tub, pondering the fact that over an extended, step-by-step process, I’d somehow been coerced into spending the night.

And don’t even get me started on the house-inhabited-by-two-beautiful-women part! The thought crossed my mind, got stuck, and wouldn’t leave. Kazuki alone was bad enough, but her mother was on a whole new level.

I had a feeling when I was talking to her on the phone, and I knew I was right the moment she stepped out of the house: if the two of them were to go out on the town together, people would absolutely assume they were siblings instead of mother and daughter. She really did look that young, but at the same time, her figure was extremely filled out in a very adult-like manner. Unlike her daughter, who was quite slender on the whole, Mother Kazuki had a classic hourglass figure.

I, meanwhile, was a virgin who'd only just had his first kiss with a partner better left undiscussed. Actually, considering how that whole thing went down, I was even worse off than your everyday virgin! I was in no position to deal with this!

Anyway, I spent way longer than I actually had to in the tub getting beaten down by an incomprehensible, anguished internal conflict and was all prune by the time I finally got out.



“Man, talk about a nice bath, Senpai!”

“It’s your house, isn’t it?” After getting out of the bath, I’d made my way to the living room, plopped down on the couch, and sorta just sat there blankly. Kazuki had woken up at some point along the way and got into the bath a little while after me. She toweled off her hair as she walked over and struck up a conversation.

That spacing-out-on-the-couch period had been so unimaginably awkward, I’d wished that I could skip over the whole thing in a single sentence, so honestly, I was pretty relieved when she came over to talk to me. Not that I’d ever admit it, of course.

Her mother told me that she had to finish preparing dinner and holed herself up in the kitchen. Being left alone in somebody else’s house with nothing to do is the absolute worst. Like, seriously, if you tweaked the circumstances just right you could actually torture someone by putting them through this.

“Sorry to make you go to all this trouble,” she said.

“It’s fine. I’m the one who made you chase after me in the first place.”

“That so? In that case, I guess we can call ourselves even! I’m gonna sit down. ‘Scuse me.”

“There’s plenty of space to sit somewhere that’s not next to me.”

“It’s my house, isn’t it?” She sat down on the same couch as me, though not close enough that we were bumping shoulders or anything. That was a bit of a relief.

“You feeling okay? Running until you pass out can’t possibly be normal.”

“No worries, happens all the time. Actually, I guess I should say that it *happened* all the time.”

“Can’t relate, no matter what tense you put it in.” When people get tired, they feel the urge to take a break. The psychological impact of being tired puts most folks out long before the actual physical exhaustion gets the chance.

Kazuki, in contrast, seemed to have no such sense of restraint. Her body could be in pieces, and it still wouldn’t be enough to keep her spirit down. Thanks to that, she could keep going till the absolute furthest limit of her physical capability until she literally collapsed. *Yeah, this girl’s a monster for sure.*

“I used to collapse all the time,” she elaborated, “but it’s been ages since I’ve really worn myself out like that.”

“‘Cause you have more stamina now?”

“That’s part of it, but the main reason’s that my club takes up a ton of time, so I don’t have much left to actually exercise.” *She exercises less now that she’s in an athletic club? What a peculiar, mysterious life form I’ve discovered.* “Plus, it’s really hard to find people who’re faster or have more endurance than me, so I don’t get many chances to push myself to my limit. And speaking of, you were awesome, A-senpai! I’ve never run like that before—it felt like my life span was draining out of my body right along with my sweat! It was like I was running myself to death! It *ruled!*”

“Yeah, sorry, *really* can’t relate.”

“The closer you get to death, the more you appreciate the fact that you’re alive!”

“Stop, that’s *terrifying!*” Fixating on death doesn’t make you more alive; it just brings you closer to dying! And the only thing waiting for you beyond that point’s, well, death.

Although, I suppose that barely making it through by the skin of your teeth *does* have a way of making you appreciate how nice it is to be alive... That’s probably what she was trying to say in the first place. But I couldn’t really see things from her perspective and didn’t really want to either.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I guess we never really talked much before now, but now that we have, I know one thing for sure: you’re a huge weirdo.”

“Oh, like *you* can talk, Senpai.”

“What? I’m a perfectly normal, utterly average high schooler!”

“Well I’m a perfectly normal, utterly average high schooler too!” Or so she claimed, but I was having a really hard time imagining her fitting into that framework.

Even if you disregard her dedicated field of expertise, she was cute enough that rumors about her were even floating around in *my* grade level. Popularity like that’s hard to ignore. Incidentally, her sporty, boyish style garnered a fair bit of attention from some of the girls. Supposedly, they treated her as their “prince,” but mentioning that felt like it’d be kicking a hornet’s nest, so I decided against it.

“Kunugi-kuuun, Renaaa, dinner’s ready!”

“Ah, I’ll help set the table, mom!” I noted how she sounded even more boyish when she dropped the semi-polite tone she used to talk to me as she leapt up from the sofa. I followed along after her and volunteered to help as well.

“Ah, that one’s my cup, Senpai! You can put it right over there.”

“Gotcha.” She ended up handling most of the actual table-setting while I just followed her orders. Her mother let a chuckle slip as she watched us at work.

“You know, I can’t help but think that the two of you look less like lovers and more like siblings!”

“Huh?” I reacted with confusion while Kazuki let out a strangled gasp. We

both froze up. I didn't drop the plate that I was holding, but honestly, that was more luck than anything else. I was so shocked that it would've been totally unsurprising if I broke it—cliché though it would've been.

"We're not *dating*, mom! Jeez!"

"Oh, you're not? Weren't you telling me about the upperclassman boy you'd taken an interest in, though?"

"That's a *different* boy!"

"Oh, my!" She looked over at me, waiting expectantly. Best I could tell, she thought Kazuki was just too embarrassed to admit it.

"We're not dating, ma'am."

"Oh, not you too, Kunugi-kun!"

"No, seriously, I'm not kidding. We're, well... The guy she's into is a friend of mine." The full story was a bit too complicated to sum up that easily. Kazuki had already confessed to me that she'd given up on her crush, after all. Glancing over, she looked a bit conflicted but was managing to cover it up with a slightly strained smile. Her heartbreak was still pretty fresh, and talking about it like that probably felt like pouring salt in the wound.

"Oh, is that so? I'm sorry, I suppose I was jumping to conclusions."

"See, mom? C'mon, stop being rude to my senpai!"

Objectively speaking, I'd say that getting mistaken for Kazuki's boyfriend was closer to an honor than an insult, but I couldn't bring myself to joke around that flippantly considering the circumstances. It wouldn't be funny, and unfunny jokes are basically never a good way to back people up.

That indescribably awkward atmosphere persisted as we moved into dinnertime. Kazuki's mother served us a nice helping of curry. It's the weirdest thing—curry's normally considered Indian food, and yet when you make it in a particular way and serve it with a helping of rice, it becomes so Japanese that it's practically our national comfort food.

"How is it, Kunugi-kun?" asked Kazuki's mother. "Do you like it?"

“Yeah, it’s super tasty!”

“Heh heh, Senpai, you sound like a little kid!”

The curry she’d made really *was* delicious. It was my first time experiencing that sort of simple-but-maternal home-cooking flavor, and I was genuinely sorta moved. I felt like I might start crying if I let my guard down. Kazuki might’ve assumed that my overenthusiastic response was sarcasm, but the gentle, almost protective smile her mother turned towards me made it clear she was under no such misapprehension.

“You have quite an appetite!” Kazuki’s mother giggled. “I made plenty for you to have seconds, so don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Okay!” It suddenly struck me that her curry was the first proper meal I’d eaten all day. The thought that I’d almost fallen prey to Renge’s hellish cooking made me all the more enthusiastic about scarfing my meal down. Kazuki and her mother were both smiling in their own distinctive manners, which was a little embarrassing, but hunger brings out the honesty in people. I ended up polishing off a full five plates’ worth of curry. In other words, way too much!

“Thanks again for cooking...” I moaned.

“You’re very welcome,” replied Kazuki’s mother. “Rena’s my only child, but it’s sort of nice to have a boy around who can eat as much as she does!”

“Seriously, Senpai, where’d you put it all? Guess I ate a ton too, though!” She really did—a full three plates of curry. Funny how “three” sounds small on its own but huge when you’re talking about plates of curry.

“Do you have any siblings, Kou-kun?” asked her mother.

“Huh? No, I don’t.”

“I see, I see! Like I said, watching you and Rena chat makes me imagine what she’d have been like around an older brother if she had one. I think it’d be a lot like how she is with you!”

“I dunno about that,” said Kazuki. “Maybe if it was Ayase-senpai.”

“Ayase-kun is the boy you have a crush on, isn’t he?”

“Ugh... Y-Yeah, mom.” Even if she’d never actually asked him out, telling her

parents she'd been heartbroken would still be a pretty tall order. Part of me wondered why she'd told her mom about her crush in the first place, but that sort of made sense too. It's natural to want to talk about the good things in your life and hide the bad stuff.

"How about you, Kou-kun? Do you have a girlfriend or a crush on anyone?"

"Nope. Neither."

"Oh, I'm surprised."

"You are? Why?"

"Well, you're quite the cutie, after all!"

"I-I am...?" I almost never got complimented on my appearance and could feel myself blushing. She was probably just flattering me, of course.

"Looks like you're pretty bad at handling my mom, huh, Senpai?" cut in Kazuki.

"Wh...? H-Huh?!"

"Feels like you're juuust a bit weirdly focused on her, you know?" She smirked as she called me out. It's not like I didn't like her mom, and I certainly wasn't trying to fixate on her, but now that she'd pointed it out it was becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"Oh, my! You know you can always join the family, Kou-kun."

"C'mon, not you too, *mom!*" I retorted sarcastically.

She let out an amused little shriek, then slapped me on my back. "'*Mom*'?! Oh, Kou-kun, you rascal!" I guess that joke landed better than expected; she was really getting into the whole thing. It didn't hurt, but it *did* make me feel really awkward again. Meanwhile, Kazuki Junior was still smirking at my expense.

"I think I found one of your weak points tonight, Senpai."

"Shut it," I grumbled. Turns out girls, and particularly mother/daughter combos, are pretty tough. They had me completely at their mercy, and all I could do was put on a strained smile and stick it out as they toyed with me. On

the other hand, though, it got me thinking.

What would my life be like if I had parents?

Renge's father, Gouki, viewed me as the son of his relative. He never treated Renge with the sort of familial intimacy that Kazuki and her mother expressed for each other—or at least, he never did so in front of me. That was probably partially just how their relationship worked and partially out of consideration for me on account of my own lack of parents.

As such, it sort of felt like this was my first time witnessing a *real* family. It was my first time experiencing the certain, distinctive warmth that comes along with it.

I never knew my mother or my father. My former self took all those memories with him when he vanished. I'd seen them in videos that were left over in the Myourenji household, but I couldn't think of the people I saw on the screen as anything other than strangers. It seemed somehow right to think of them that way. I didn't feel anything as I watched them, least of all pain.

And yet, for some reason, in that moment I felt a slight, sudden impulse to learn more about my parents. It wouldn't help me *feel* the fact that they were my parents, and I knew it, but I still wondered if it might help me *understand*.

Maybe it would help me understand why the curry Kazuki's mother made was so delicious.

Maybe it would help me understand why their smiles were so warm and dazzling in my eyes.

Another Slice of Life

“I’m sorry. Rena just won’t wake up no matter what I do.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. We’ll see each other at school anyway.” I left the Kazuki household shortly after sunrise wearing a fresh, clean uniform. I only planned to make a quick stop at my house and then head straight to school, but her mother followed along to see me off anyway. I felt like she was making way too big a deal out of the whole thing.

“It’s no wonder, considering how late she stayed up,” she continued. “And after running until she passed out too! You must have really been enjoying yourselves.”

I laughed awkwardly. “Enjoying ourselves” was one way to describe it, I guess. Kazuki had spent the entire evening extolling the virtues of running, explaining how great it is to push yourself to your limits, and trying to urge me to join the track team. I was more than a bit fed up with her one-sided sermon by the time it was finally over. All those wistful, sentimental feelings I’d built up had been completely blown away by her spiel, and even though all sorts of impactful stuff had happened to me throughout the day, the only part that actually turned up in my dreams was Kazuki.

“Thanks again, Kou-kun! If you wouldn’t mind, I’d really appreciate it if you’d keep looking after Rena. It’s good to know she has a friend like you.”

“Yeah, of course.” I couldn’t exactly decide that unilaterally—it was more up to her than me, frankly—but I agreed anyway for politeness’s sake. It goes without saying that I definitely didn’t plan on “looking after” her closely enough to join the track team.

“Feel free to come visit any time!”

“I will, thanks!” Now *that* one I was actually sincere about. Her curry was powerfully alluring. It’d be pretty darn rude to treat her place like a restaurant, but I was absolutely planning on coming up with some sort of pretext to show

up for dinner again eventually.

“By the way, I still have another eight hundred recipes in my repertoire you haven’t tried yet!”

“Holy crap, seriously?! I wanna eat all of them!” *I could try a dish a day, and it’d still take a little over two years! I cannot pass this up!*

“You could eat as much of my cooking as you wanted if you joined the family, you know?”

“In, uhh, what sense?”

“Rena-chan’s a real cutie, isn’t she?”

“I’m not following your logic here...”

“I’d love to hear all about how things are progressing between you two the next time you come over!”

“Aha ha ha...” *Okay, yeah, I get it now. Change of plans: never coming back here again. Man, this really sucks.*



I made my way from Kazuki’s place to mine, then from my place to school.

As a side note, the durian smell in my apartment had completely vanished overnight. Renge’s doing, most likely—actually, the entire apartment looked like it’d been cleaned. She’d probably called in a housekeeping service or whatever. I considered thanking her but, upon further consideration, realized that she’d probably complain about how I ran off and left it to her in the first place, so I decided to put it off. Indefinitely. I might have recovered physically, but I was still a total chicken at heart.

So anyway, I made it to school in no time, no problem. Look at mister exemplary student over here, heyo! It was Friday, and Oumei High was the sort of school that gave its students the full weekend off consistently, so under normal circumstances everyone would be in full-on pre-weekend relaxation mode. The fact that finals would be starting the week after next, however, meant that circumstances were notably *abnormal*. The school was awash with an air of tension—or rather, an air of grim, tragic determination.

By the next week, tests would be right around the corner, and some of the students who'd given up entirely would start acting up. Then, once finals were finished, *summer vacation* would be right around the corner, and another portion of the student body would get so hyped up for it that they'd go crazy all over again. In that sense, the heavy, gloomy atmosphere was more or less a one-day deal.

It was the sort of atmosphere that really deeply drove in the fact that finals were looming...or rather, it drove it in for people other than me. I, after all, had done jack squat to study for them. My place on the summer school roster was apparently already set in stone, so what did I have to lose, anyway?!

"Ah! Morning, Kou!" Kaito walked into the school and greeted me right as I was stowing my sneakers in my shoebox.

"Sup, Kaito?"

"Not much, but what about you? You're looking pretty gloomy."

"Huh? I am?" I'd been doing my best to keep a defiant attitude in the face of adversity, but apparently the cloud of melancholy hanging over the school was getting to me after all.

"You feeling okay?" he persisted.

"Huh? Yeah, I'm fine."

"Jeez, though, Daimon-sensei really blew a gasket when she realized you weren't showing up yesterday. She thought you were cutting class again."

"I don't even wanna think about that..." Our homeroom teacher, Daimon Kasumi, was single, somewhere around thirty years old, and *definitely* not a lady I wanted to provoke the wrath of. She had a pretty substantial chip on her shoulder about the whole not-finding-someone-to-marry thing, and who knows *what* might happen to me if I gave her the chance to vent that anger in my direction... *Man, teachers who act like they're the king of the classroom are such a pain. I'll sic the PTA on her one of these days. Mark my words!*

"She did cool down when she heard that you really were sick, though. She was actually pretty worried about you." *Gotta love a homeroom teacher who genuinely cares about her kids! You're the best, Daimon-chan!*

As I privately executed one of my finely honed and incredibly abrupt internal attitude shifts, we strolled to the classroom. Kotou and Kiryu were already waiting for us inside. Kotou was actually in a totally different class, of course. Details, details...

“Morning, Tsumugi, Kyouka,” said Kaito with a smile as bright as the sun.

The two girls returned his greeting. *What an incredibly peaceful morning.* Somehow, it really underlined the fact that a high school student’s primary occupation is going to school. Getting sick in weird ways and being too bedridden to go to class causes nothing but trouble. I wanted to go back in time, slap my past self upside the head, and tell him to get his ass up and go to school, even if it kills him.

“C’mon! Go for it, Kyou-chan!” whispered Kotou, glancing at me as she jabbed Kiryu with her elbow.

“‘Kyou-chan’?” I parroted, skeptically. Given the elbow thing, I figured she must’ve meant Kiryu, but since when did she end up with a weirdly cute, mascot-character nickname like that?

“D-Don’t pressure me, Kotou-san...” Kiryu glanced at me as well, though she was mostly occupied by resisting Kotou’s goading. I had a pretty good idea what was going on: Kotou Tsumugi’s fetish had manifested, and she was trying to tell Kiryu to greet me like a proper childhood friend.

Thing is, greeting someone after being called out like that’s actually pretty nerve-racking! Kiryu and I *had* split up on a pretty uncomfortable note the day before, so she was almost definitely worrying about how she should act towards me. *All right, looks like it’s time for me to take the lead! Kunugi-kun’s fully recovered and back in action!*

“Morning, Kyou-chan!” I said, copying Kotou’s nickname for a bright and cheery greeting.

“Kyou—?!”

“The heck?! Kunugicchi’s gone crazy!” *Okay, so they didn’t take that super well. Why is it okay when Kotou says it but “crazy” when I do? This is sexist for*

sure! Somehow!

“Morning, Tsumu-Tsumu,” I continued, doubling down.

“Mngh... Morning, Koutarou!”

“Okay, now that’s just a completely different name.” I thought I was being clever by copying her nickname shtick, but I certainly hadn’t been prepared for her to call me by a wrong-but-real name. *Conventional tactics are no match for her!*

“G-Good morning, K-Kou-chan!” Kiryu somehow managed to slip into a gap in our skirmish and squeeze out a greeting. A pretty Kotou-esque one too. The two of us turned to look at her. “Wh-What?! He made fun of me with a nickname! I was just getting him back for it!”

“Oh em *gee*, Kyou-chan, you’re *adorable*,” mumbled Kotou. Honestly, she was right. Kiryu was blushing vividly and fidgeting like a classic shy-girl stereotype. The gap between the way she was acting and her usual attitude enhanced the effect—the whole thing was cute as hell. “Again! Do it again, Kyou-chan! Pleeease!”

“Wh-What?! Do what again?!”

“The way you said hi to him! C’mon, repeat after me: ‘Good morning, Kou-chan!’”

“A-Absolutely not! One greeting’s good enough, isn’t it?!”

“As if a greeting you have to force out one syllable at a time could ever be good enough! I couldn’t even *hear* it! Right, Kunugicchi?!”

“Yes. Of. Course. I. Heard. Nothing.”

“See!”

“He’s lying! Obviously! I’ve never heard that flat of a monotone before! Stop making fun of me, both of you!” Her face was somehow flushed even harder than before, and she was practically quivering with rage.

“Oh, c’mon, Kyou-chan, you can’t get embarrassed about something like this!” laughed Tsumugi. “You don’t wanna let you-know-who take the lead, right?”

“Who’s you-know-who, Tsumugi?” Kaito popped in.

“Butt out, Kaito! Actually, wait, that’s it! You can help us out too!”

“There’s nothing to help out with in the first place!” shouted Kiryu. “Are you even listening to me?!”

Kaito looked bewildered. “Any idea what they’re talking about, Kou?”

“Not a clue.” The two of us were completely out of the loop and could only spectate their exchange. Speaking of which, we weren’t the only spectators—at that point, the vast majority of students in the classroom had begun watching.

Kiryu had a reputation for being an ever-calm, stunningly beautiful honor student (and also for being more than a bit antisocial, frankly). I mean, the closest she had ever come to chatting with *me* before that point had been a one-sided barrage of insults! And yet there she was, bantering away in public with Kotou like a perfectly ordinary girl.

The two of them may not have realized it, but they had a trait in common: absolutely everyone agreed that their looks were stunning. Like, really attention-grabbingly so. The assorted lecher-boys (intended as a compliment) and paparazzi-girls (not specifically intended as a compliment, but I guess I can count it as one) were straight-up holding their breaths in the hopes of catching every detail of the two’s conversation.

“Is it just me, or has Kiryu changed lately...?” one of them whispered. “Feels like she’s nicer than she used to be. I think I dig it.”

“Right?” another replied. “It’s like she’s more approachable than before...not to mention super cute! Huge tits too!” *Yup, good work, guys; that’s exactly the sort of background chatter you’d expect in a scene like this! A+ exposition! Bonus points for keeping it juuust quiet enough that they can’t hear you!*

Some folks would probably be upset, of course. Her scary, prickly nature was definitely one of her distinctive traits—they’d probably argue that abandoning that and turning her into more of an ordinary girl was a betrayal of her character. They’d say that being an ever-composed, solitary ice queen was her whole appeal.

I probably would’ve been right there with them just a little while back.

Between her long black hair and the overall image she put out, I thought I had her pegged from the get-go. It took me a long time to realize that she was, well, a person. And looking at her from that perspective, of *course* she's a more appealing character this way. *She actually looks like she's happy now.*

"You really are something, Kou."

"Huh? Kaito?"

"Ah, y'know, just sorta popped into my head, seeing Kyouka act like this."

"How she acts has nothing to do with me."

"I'm not so sure about that." Kaito shined one of his usual profoundly meaningful, profoundly handsome smiles my way. *C'mon, Mister Hotty Hot-Stuff, use that on the girls, not me! They'd fall for you in a second!* Some of the girls already had their shipping-sails half unfurled, and if I were as hot as him, they'd probably be chattering about who's the top before I knew it. *Kou/Kaito... Makes me shudder just thinking about it.*

I looked over at Kiryu again, and our eyes happened to meet. She let out a weird little grunt of surprise as if I'd just poked her or something. Then she pursed her lips tightly and stared at me in total silence. I returned her gaze, also silently, but in a more confused sort of way.

Kotou fidgeted excitedly next to her, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. She was trying to instigate something, no doubt about it. *What's going on here, and what can I do about it? Do I wait for her to say something, or do I seize the initiative and steer the conversation in a different direction?*

For some reason, my mind jumped to Ayase Hikari. To the girl who'd told me she loved me mere moments before I erased myself from her memories. I didn't understand *why* she would come to mind at that particular moment, and I didn't have the time to think it through either. It feels like I'm—like we're *all* always on a time limit, and that limit's never long enough to give us the chance to properly think our decisions through.

"Okay, people, let's get homeroom started!" shouted Daimon-sensei as she walked into the classroom. "Hmm? Why's everyone so quiet?"

Pretty much everyone—both the students who'd been there since the

beginning and the ones who walked in mid-conversation—was focused on us (well, on Kiryu, really). The atmosphere was totally silent and a bit strained, but Daimon-sensei's entrance finally eased a bit of the tension and let everyone relax.

Not to say that she couldn't read the room or anything! It *was* actually time for homeroom to start, just like always. I hadn't quite registered how tense things were, but as the atmosphere returned to the status quo, it felt like time had started flowing once more. I heard more than one person sigh simultaneously and figured they'd been holding their breaths. Kiryu and I were included in that group, incidentally.

Throughout all of this, Daimon-sensei just looked confused. "What's with you kids today...? And hey, Kotou, this isn't your class! Get outta here!"

"Ah, right!" Kotou squeaked. Considering the bewildered look on Daimon-sensei's face, she'd probably realized how weird things were in the classroom, but she drove Kotou out anyway. That was the end of the whole incident. We all sat down at our desks, and the morning went back to normal in an instant.

What was Kiryu about to say, though? It had to be something about the night before, right? From her perspective, a mysterious middle-aged man barged into my house and kissed me out of nowhere, I chased after him in a rage, and that was the end of it. Of *course* she'd be curious. If I were watching a movie and it ended on a scene like that, I'd be beside myself with curiosity and go far out of my way to see the sequel as soon as possible.

Kotou getting involved, however, was pretty out of left field. It threw my analysis of the situation into chaos—no matter how hard I tried, I could never quite understand that girl's eccentric mindset. Trying to analyze her type is a waste of time *and* effort. Yoshiki Yuu fell into the same category, and for that matter, Kazuki Rena qualified solidly as well. *Why are there so many of them in my social circle, anyway?!*

Meanwhile, the quiet buzz of whispers continued.

"Y'know, I think I might go for Kiryu after all..."

"Dude, for real?!"

“She was totally looking at me a minute ago, I swear! I’ve got a shot!”

That last one came from right behind me. The little show she put on stole the hearts of some of my classmates, I guess. Asking her out, though? I’d never even considered the idea...because I’d never do it. *Ever*. It’d be ridiculously abrupt, not to mention insane.

In the end, my only option was to wait and see what happens. They *do* say good things come to those who wait, after all. I was fond of that expression—it drove in the fact that this was a world in which sleeping on your problems was entirely acceptable. What an easy world to live in, right?

In short: I’mma sleep now. Send all further correspondence to HeWhoWaits@FastAsleep.jp.

“Oh, and Kunugi-kun? See me in the staff room after class.”

What a shame; I was too asleep to hear my (eternally single) teacher’s words. Zzz.



Not that it matters, but if you’ve ever crossed your arms on your desk and used them as a makeshift pillow, doesn’t it get *really* hot and muggy when you breathe into that space? The way the moisture builds up on the surface of the desk is pretty gross too, and it’s just fundamentally not a comfortable way to sleep. It’s like sticking your face—and *only* your face—into a particularly humid sauna.

Breathing in a sauna isn’t easy, and I’m pretty sure I’m not the only person who always starts feeling like leaving long before I hit my heat limit. I bet that if you could do something about how hard it is to breathe in them, saunas would be a lot more popular across the board. Like, I genuinely believe that.

“But that’s only how I feel about ‘em, of course. You ever stop to think about saunas, Sensei?”

“What the hell are you going on about...?”

“Hey, it’s rude to answer a question with a question!”

Daimon-sensei was on the spot, and I was the one putting her there. “I really

don't care," she sighed.

"That so?" Truthfully, same, but if I said that out loud, her anger index would definitely go up by several points. I have *no* idea where the danger zone on that index starts, by the way. All I can say for sure is that even a few extra points on the anger index means a highly elevated chance of instant death. There was never a safe zone to begin with!

"Let's get to the point. You're probably wondering why I called you in here."

"Yes?"

"How're you feeling? All better now?"

"Bwuh?" I was so surprised, my mind totally shut down for a second.

"I heard you were in really bad shape yesterday. What, you didn't think I'd be worried about you?" She must've realized how shocked I was and sighed heavily. She was right. I figured she'd have *something* to scold me about, at least.

"And...that's it?"

"Hmm?"

"But... But that means you're being *nice* to me!"

"Hey, inside voice, kid! This is the staff room, for crying out loud..."

"At this rate, this'll turn into one of those scenes where a teacher's all nice and stuff to one of their kids! That means I'll be fertilizer for *your* character development, and y'know what fertilizer's made out of? *Bullcrap!*"

"Okay, the volume's better now, but your mouth's still filthy!"

"My Captain!"

"Who're you even *talking* about?!" She sighed again. She had a real combo going. "Anyway, I'm not even being that nice in the first place. I'm a teacher, so thinking about my kids every once in a while's just part of the job."

"Oh, jeez, way to talk yourself up... And also, calling me all the way to the staff room while I'm still recovering's a pretty backwards way to show how

much you're thinking about me, isn't it?"

"You're the one who said I was being nice in the first place! Sheesh, I shouldn't have worried. If you can smack-talk me like this, you've definitely recovered already." She looked pretty darn exasperated, and I found myself shrinking away. "Well, as long as you're all better, that's all that matters. You would've been in a real fix if you'd gotten sick during the tests, but recovering right before they started wouldn't have been much better either. Wouldn't have left you much time to make up for all the classes you missed. You've *already* missed enough lessons lately that you're in real danger of repeating a grade."

"Aww, shucks, Sensei!"

"Wasn't a compliment."

"By the way, who told you that I was sick, anyway?"

"Your guardian."

"Oooh..." I guess that would mean Gouki-san? Apparently I'd inadvertently caused trouble for him once again. I decided to apologize later.

While I was busy regretting my decisions, another teacher arrived to join the conversation. "Hey there, Kunugi-kun!"

"Oh, Ashikita-sensei. Long day, huh?" Daimon-sensei replied.

"Oh, the usual, Daimon-kun." Ashikita-sensei was the school's resident math teacher—a graying old man who was probably somewhere in his late fifties. He was a real nice guy too; he'd been married for ages and had an overall pleasant demeanor. Math teachers are usually known for making their students suffer, but his popularity among the student body made him an exception to that rule. You could just sorta tell he was a decent dude at a glance.

I was surprised, though. Being the thirtyish-and-single lady she was, I figured that Daimon-sensei would prioritize her relationships with the bachelors in the school's faculty. My assumption was that she'd more or less ignore a married man like Ashikita-sensei, but there she was, talking to him in the most normal manner imaginable.

“You were just thinking something rude, weren’t you?” she said, reading my mind. I guess thinking about your students enough gives you the power to know what your students are thinking? *Can’t a guy get some privacy over here?*

“What? Perish the thought!” I lied.

“I heard you were sick,” said Ashikita-sensei, throwing me a casual lifeline. “How’re you doing? All better now?”

“Ah, yeah, I am. Thanks for asking,” I replied with a grateful nod.

“Is it just me, or do you have a completely different attitude with him than you do with me?” Daimon-sensei interjected.

“Well, I mean, yeah.”

“‘Yeah’? Whaddya mean, ‘yeah’?” She glared at me so hard, I could practically hear the sound effect. *Kunugi-kun is paralyzed! He may be unable to move!* I mean, really, of course I’d have different attitudes towards the two of them, considering that Daimon-sensei was consistently strict with me and Ashikita-sensei was consistently nice. High school boys are really sensitive like that.

Ashikita-sensei laughed. “You two certainly are close, aren’t you?”

“I don’t think that’s the best way to describe a teacher’s relationship with her student, for what it’s worth...” She started out strong, but by the end of her sentence, Daimon-sensei’s tone had grown substantially less forceful. No surprise there—it’s hard for an almost-thirty-year-old to take a firm stance against a fifty-something-year-old.

“Oh, I meant it in a good way, of course! From my perspective, it looks like Kunugi-kun’s opening up to you. Having a teacher to confide in is really important for students.”

“I-Is that how it looks?” Daimon-sensei seemed slightly bashful. Guess she wasn’t upset hearing that from him after all. *I-It’s not like I actually opened up to her or anything, though!*

“By the way, Kunugi-kun,” he said, turning to me. “Mind if I ask you something off topic?”

“Uhh, sure.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Huh?”

“Wha—Ashikita-sensei! Why would you ask a student about that?!” It really *was* off topic, and incredibly abrupt to boot. The question smacked me senseless, and Daimon-sensei immediately jumped in to admonish him, but he just smiled his way through her protests and ignored them.

“I, ahh, don’t...?”

“Oh? You’re a second-year, so next summer you’ll be hitting the books for your entrance exams. That makes this summer the last one you’ll get to play around, don’t you think? The school trip’s coming up right after vacation ends, as well. I met my own wife back in high school, you know? It might be hard to appreciate at your age, but it really is possible to find yourself a partner in school who’ll stick with you for a lifetime.”

“Okaaaay?” His sudden, self-centered ramble left me and Daimon-sensei completely bewildered. Never thought that the fifty-something-year-old gentleman Ashikita himself would more or less openly endorse students getting into the sort of questionable relationship that most schools have policies against! Then again, if his story was to be believed, he ended up marrying the lady, so I guess it might’ve been aboveboard by *somebody’s* standards?

A low growl rumbled through the air. *Oh, crap!* Ashikita-sensei’s careless words had scored an accidental critical hit on a certain almost-thirty-year-old!

“So, Kunugi-kun?” he continued, apparently not caring at all about Daimon-sensei’s current state. Or maybe he just didn’t notice her?

“Y-Yes?”

“Do you have a type? When it comes to girls, I mean.”

Hooly crap, this old dude just doesn’t stop! You can’t just go throwing the staff room into chaos like this, man! And yet he kept the same placid, almost saintly smile on the entire time as he casually committed some fairly unambiguous sexual harassment. But it didn’t feel like he meant anything bad by it at all, so it was *really* hard to call him out on it.

“Okay, *now* it’s starting to get interesting. Go on, spit it out, Kunugi.” Miss Almost-Thirty jumped into the conversation to finish me off while I was on the run, smiling in a strained sort of way that made it clear she’d taken plenty of damage herself. Was she just trying to drag me down with her? She probably thought she’d be able to make me say something really embarrassing and then tease me about it! So much for thinking about her students!

“Umm...”

I had to figure *something* out. I could go with a generic answer and say something like “I like nice people,” but I didn’t think Ashikita-sensei would let me slide on a cop-out like that, not to mention Daimon-sensei. I could see their “And? What else?” coming a mile away.

C’mon, think, think! Work those brain muscles! Power that light bulb! If my goal was to get out of this incredibly fruitless conversation as quickly as possible, then the best response would be something that puts them off so thoroughly it ends the whole thing in a flash, even if that means a bit of temporary humiliation. I had to be a huge poser!

Something ridiculous, something over the top... I was, unfortunately, working under a time limit. The longer I thought about it, the more painful it would be to actually go through with it. What I needed was speed and force! As such, I plucked out the first words that crossed my mind and spat them out without even stopping to think about what they were.

“I’m into the sort of girl who would never fall for me under any circumstance, I guess!”

It felt like the very air in the staff room froze solid. Ashikita-sensei’s gentlemanly smile and Daimon-sensei’s bloodthirsty one were exceptions, though. They’d both shifted into expressions of dumbfounded amazement.

“U-Umm...” I think I was even more bemused than they were. Honestly, I hadn’t anticipated that reaction at *all*. I was expecting an “are you kidding me?!” or a “quit trying to act cool, kid!” or something to that effect. I didn’t know how to deal with a “we just heard something we’d have been better off

never learning.” I had to dig myself out of the hole I’d jumped into.

“U-Uhh, I mean, you know how a bit of hardship always makes passion burn all the brighter, right? Or something along those lines?”

Ashikita-sensei thought for a moment, then nodded, smiled, and threw in an “I think I understand.” *Phew! Looks like he bought it...* “In other words, you’re aiming for Daimon-sensei?”

“*WHAT?!*” The two of us shouted in simultaneous indignation. His remark had broken new ground in the field of incomprehensible logic leaps.

“A forbidden love between student and teacher...” he continued. “Heh heh, I sympathize. That’s an easy fantasy for high schoolers to fall into.”

“Ashikita-sensei...” said Daimon-sensei, choosing her words carefully. “Are you serious?”

“*I’m* just kidding, but whether or not Kunugi-kun’s serious about it is anyone’s guess.” His grin took on a sort of suggestive, teasing hint to it. I was finally starting to realize where he was going with all this. “Come to think of it, you’re not seeing anyone right now, are you, Daimon-sensei? What do you think of that, Kou-kun?”

“Umm, honestly, I don’t think it matters one way or another...”

“Oh? That’s a surprise. You’re not denying it?”

I hesitated again, choosing my words carefully. “It’d be unethical, for one thing, and even if it wasn’t, this whole thing stinks of sexual harassment.”

“Oh, pardon me!” he laughed, returning to his usual good-natured smile. “You start losing perspective on that sort of thing when you get to my age; it’s a bad habit.”

Daimon-sensei was frowning, making absolutely no effort to hide how displeased she was with him. As I checked her expression, she happened to glance over at me as well. Our eyes met briefly, but an instant later she looked away again.

“I’m, ah, pretty hungry, actually!” I exclaimed. “I’ll be heading out here—thanks!” An awkwardness of a very different variety was setting in, and I

decided to beat a hasty retreat. I excused myself, left the staff room, then paused for a moment to sigh.

Seriously... What did I do to deserve that? All I could do was pray that none of the other teachers had been listening in. Worrying about that wouldn't accomplish anything, though, and I genuinely *was* hungry, so I decided to get out of there on the double.

"Oh ho *ho*!"

And no sooner had I decided that than a voice rang out behind me! It was like the world itself was dead set on not allowing me a second of time to indulge in listless ennui. I didn't even have to turn around. Out of all the bright and exemplary fifteen-to-eighteen-year-olds who attended Oumei High, I only knew one girl capable of packing that much audible stupidity into a single laugh. She was exemplary, all right, but only in the field of idiocy.

"Fancy meeting you here, Kunugi-san!"

"This is a curse. It has to be; nothing else makes sense anymore." The second I step out into the hallway at lunchtime, this runt somehow manages to catch me every single time. How could that be anything other than a curse?

As you've probably surmised, the voice belonged to none other than the kooky little numbskull Yoshiki Yuu.

"I was just waiting for my friend to show up, but you're my friend too, so I guess you'll do!"

"Great..." *I'll "do" for what?* My incredibly unenthusiastic reply probably made my doubts pretty clear. A normal person would instantly pick up on the fact that I wasn't in a great mood, but needless to say, the Li'l Dummy in front of me was completely oblivious. *I gotta get out of here...*

"Hey, where're you going?" She dashed around me and cut me off!

"The school store, then back to my classroom. Problem?"

"Problem! Come on, let's chat! Why waste the opportunity?" *What opportunity is there to waste? Your encounter rate's been so friggin' high since we met that walking into the hallway and not seeing you would feel like more of*

an opportunity than anything else!

Of course, no matter how I replied, there wasn't the slightest chance she'd actually listen to me. She grabbed on to the side of my pants too, meaning I had no way of getting away from her—the munchkin thought this through; I'll give her that.

Unlike Ashikita or Daimon-sensei, Yuuta had a childish, innocent smile that would make me feel *really* bad about kicking her halfway down the hallway. I'm not *that* savage. I sighed, partially out of resignation and partially because I'd developed the habit of sighing every time she turned up. Naturally, she didn't pick up on any of the emotions that sigh carried in the slightest.



“Ooof, *yikes*. Like, seriously, just *yikes*.”

So, I failed to escape from Yuuta. I ended up squatting down face-to-face with her in the hallway by the staff room, completely locked into her textbox. I didn't exactly have anything pressing to take care of, so when she decided to be uncharacteristically caring and say, “By the way, that was one big sigh a minute ago! Are you worried about something?” I decided to indulge my curiosity, take the bait, and ask for her input on all the stuff that'd happened to me just a few minutes before.

The result: my stupid little kouhai cringed *super* hard at me.

“Let's calm down and think this through, okay? Isn't only falling for girls who would never fall for you setting yourself up for failure from the very start?”

“Sure is,” I said after an awkward pause.

“And besides, that's the sort of logic that only people who're already pretty popular with girls can get away with. Are you one of those super popular harem-lead sorta guys, Kunugi-san?”

“Spare me, please...” *Oh god, my face must be on fire! The shame, the shame, the shaaame! Nothing could possibly be more agonizing than getting dragged by this openly idiotic urchin!*

“I mean, really! If you told anyone other than me about this, they'd probably

friend-dump you, y’know?”

“It’s *that* bad? Friendship-destroying bad?!”

“Go ahead, give it a try! Once you’ve told everyone you know about this and end up a desolate loner, I’ll be happy to be the only person who gives you the time of day! You can be totally socially dependent on me!”

“Why would you dream up a scenario like that?! Your imagination’s scaring me!”

“*Your* ridiculous edgelord-ness is scaring *me*!” Yuuta took a long, deep breath, then let out an equally long, equally deep sigh. Meanwhile, my heart buried itself deeper and deeper underground. “Let me think about this... Okay, Kunugisan, why don’t you ask me about my type?”

I hesitated. “Your type? Really?”

“Really. Oh, but I’m a maiden, so you have to take it really seriously, okay?” The look in Yuuta’s eyes was about as serious as she was asking me to be. I couldn’t suss out her intentions, but since she was doing it that earnestly, I figured I might as well play along. I took a deep breath as well, thinking about all the scenes I’d seen in movies that went along those lines and imagining the sort of role I was supposed to play.

“Yoshiki... No—*Yuu*.”

“‘Yuu’?! Y-Yes?!” I looked her squarely in the eyes, which widened as she returned my gaze.

“So, uh, hey. I was just wondering—what sort of guys are you into?”

“Do you...really wanna know?” *Wait, what? She’s not gonna answer right away? Why’s she dragging it out? This isn’t scripted, is it?*

“Yeah, I do.”

“But...why?” *Because you told me to ask! No shit!*

...But no, actually, she might be on to something here. If I asked her about her type and she replied instantly, it’d sound really dubious. Taking the time to be all hesitant and set a super-serious mood would make the whole thing feel way more authentic. *Dang, Yuuta... Not bad at all for a girl who barely comes up to*

my waist. Maybe she's trying to teach me a really smooth, ideal way to respond to the question? She might be a lot more used to this sort of thing than I gave her credit for!

And of course, if that was what she was going for, I had no choice but to jump on the bandwagon. "Because I've, well... I've sorta taken an interest in you."

"In me...? You have? Tee hee!"

I paused dramatically. "So, I really wanna know. Tell me: what's your type?" It was *not* an easy act to pull off. I felt like I was gonna break out in goosebumps. *You can do this! Endure!*

"All right. My type..." She paused, narrowing her eyes and turning away from me. She fidgeted for a moment, then finally looked up once more, locked eyes with me, and spat it out.

"I'm into the sort of boy who would never fall for me under any *OUCH?!'*" I reflexively karate-chopped the top of her head. *Nice work, reflexes! My spinal cord's still got it where it counts!*

"What was *that* for?!" she squealed indignantly.

"That's *my* line! I was all excited for some sorta master class, and then you were just friggin' making fun of me!"

"Excuse me, I was putting my everything into teaching you just how ridiculously cringey of a line it was! I was being *nice!*"

"Then what was the point of the whole stupid preamble?!"

"Oh, like you weren't getting into it too!"

"I was *not!*" *Aaaargh, I can't stand this girl!*

"So anyway, are you actually pretty popular, Senpai?"

"Where's this coming from?"

"I said before, right? That answer you gave was popular-dude logic. It wouldn't make sense for you to say something like that if you'd never been at least a little popular, would it?" Yuuta smirked obnoxiously. In a certain sense, I was jealous of the fact that she could be that proud about that level of "logic."

“I’m not really popular, no.”

“Oh, that’s a surprise...”

“Wait, it is? Does that mean that I seem like the sorta guy who would be?”

“It’s surprising that you’d say you’re into girls who would never fall for you when you’re not even popular to begin with! Like, really?!”

“Yeah! Fair enough!” *Why did I even bother asking when I already knew the answer?! And quit smirking like that, you stupid munchkin!*

“Screw it, I’m outta here...”

“Oh, right, you said you were going to the school store, didn’t you? Don’t you think it’ll be totally sold out by now, though?”

“In that case, I’m going back to class and passing out...”

“Heh heh heh! I’ve got good news for you, Kunugi-san!” Yuuta proudly held up a pair of cloth-wrapped lunch boxes she’d been holding at her side. *A...pair?*

“Wait, what’s with those?”

“Heh heh heh, well spotted, Kunugi-san! Are you curious? Are you?”

“You’re the one who showed me—”

“They’re lunch boxes!”

“Yeah, I can tell... Wait. Lunch *boxes*?” Something about the way she said it caught my attention. Was there a slight emphasis on the “boxes” part, or was it just me?

Hmmm? Oh, okay, I get it. I see it coming a mile away! They’re just lunch boxes, with nothing inside! Thinking about it logically, there’s no way Yuuta would ever bring a pair of lunches to school, considering her daily flailing-around-by-the-school-store routine. She might’ve pulled a fast one on me a moment before, but I wasn’t about to let her have her way twice in a row!

This was *Yuuta* we were talking about. She was probably walking around with an empty lunch box in a pea-brained attempt to trick herself into *feeling* like she’d just eaten a hot, satisfying meal, or something similarly ridiculous. *That’s almost tragic...*

“By the way, they really do have food in them! They’re full to bursting!”

“Oh. That so...?” *Never mind, I was jumping to conclusions. Hmph!*

“And by the way, this one’s for my friend, so I don’t have so much as a cent to give to you, Kunugi-san!”

“A ‘cent’?” When all was said and done, the only even remotely valuable information I gained from that whole exchange was the fact that Yuuta had a couple lunch boxes. As far as my hunger was concerned, nothing had been resolved whatsoever. *Maybe I’d feel better if I gave the shrimpling just one good punch...? Wait, no, down Kou, down! Going all out on a kid like her would make you the childish one! And violence isn’t gonna solve anything either!*

“Disappointed, Kunugi-san? Ah! Don’t tell me you were hoping to mooch off your kouhai’s lunch? Wouldn’t that be, like, *super* embarrassing, from a senpai perspective?”

“I was just thinking, ‘Oh, huh, she’s got a lunch box,’ that’s all. I’m not even hungry! What’s your deal?”

“But your stomach was just rumbling a second ago!”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Nope!” *Why, that little...* I had most definitely gotten got.

“Okay, fine, you win! I’m hungry, okay?! Ahh, dammit, and seeing you wave your stupid lunches in my face just makes me even hungrier! I’m gonna go back to my classroom, pass out, and try to forget about it!”

“Not so fast!”

“Why?! I just described *exactly* what I’m gonna do! Laid it all out like narration in a novel! For the love of god, just let me *go* already! I’m begging you!”

“The truth is, these lunches aren’t actually mine.”

“Oh! They’re not! Great! Then why were you friggin’ bragging about them?!”

“M-My friend made them for me, so they’re mine, technically!”

“Okay, so they *are* yours after all! What the hell are you trying to accomplish

here?!”

“They’re mine, but they weren’t mine to begin with, so, I mean... If I’m gonna share some of them with you, I have to ask the person who made them about it first!”

“Wait, you’ll share some with me?” Now *that* was a bolt from the blue. I never imagined that Yuuta, of all people, had the capacity for charity!

“Only if she says it’s okay, though! She made it for me, after all...”

“Not gonna lie, for a second I thought that the fact you forced your friend to make a lunch box for you goes to show what a greedy little gremlin you are, but I changed my mind! You might be a pretty decent person after all!”

““Greedy little gremlin’?!”

“Seriously, it takes some real maturity to give away something that somebody else gave *you* and look smug as hell about it!”

“You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?! I don’t even know if I wanna share anymore...”

“Oh, you kidder! I know you’d never abandon me!”

“So obnoxious...”

I gave Yuuta a hearty pat on the head and ruffled her hair like the good-natured young man I’d just turned into. Sure, she called me obnoxious for it, but she was just being bashful. She didn’t *actually* mean I was... *Wait. This is pretty obnoxious of me, isn’t it? Whoops.*

Nevertheless, I patted on. This would be the first and last time I patted her head like that in my life. She kept clamoring on about how “obnoooooxious” I was being for a while, but before long, the absurdity of the situation got the better of her and her tirade gave way to laughter. *Whoops, did I break her?*

Yuuta’s friend though, huh? Wonder what sorta person she is, and I wonder if she’ll be okay with Yuuta splitting her lunch with me... Wait. Huh?

Yuuta’s friend?

“Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just, ahh, to double-check—you only have one friend, right?”

“I have two!”

“Right, and that’s counting me, yeah?”

“Yup, yup!” Meaning the other person who’d be showing up soon would be her other friend. And that would mean...

“Sorry, Yuuta, just remembered something! Gotta go now, bye!”

“Huwha?! Kunugi-san?! Hey, wait!” I spun around and fled at top speed, ignoring her shouts.

There was only one person who Yuuta’s other friend could possibly be: *her*. And meeting *her* at that moment would be *bad*, primarily because I wasn’t even close to emotionally prepared for it.

I sprinted around a corner at top speed and hid, peeking back down the hallway. A second later, a girl I knew well emerged from the staff room wearing a uniform that was simultaneously incredibly familiar and incredibly new, seeing as I’d only seen this particular girl wearing it once before.

“Sorry I’m late, Yuu-chan... Huh? Why’s your hair all messy? What happened?”

It was Ayase Hikari. The girl whose memories I’d stolen just two days before.

A Perfectly Normal Lunchtime, Probably

Oumei High has a courtyard. It's located between the main schoolhouse and the gym and serves as a nice little gathering space for the students. There are some benches and tables set up so that people can eat lunch out there, and since the buildings that flank it keep it nice and shaded, it's cool even during the heat of summer. Whoever designed the place did their homework. I'd never actually bothered going out there before and was surprised to find how pleasant it was.

I was lurking in a corner of that courtyard, hidden behind a convenient pillar. As for why I was forgoing food and sleep in spite of my hearty appetite for both, well...there was really only one reason.

"I'm sorry, Yuu-chan—you're definitely mad at me, aren't you? I lost track of time and spent way too long talking with our teacher, I know..."

"Huh? Ah, no I'm not! You didn't do anything wrong, Hikari-chan! I'm mad about something *totally* different!"

"And in a manner of speaking, I made you wait for me the whole week I wasn't at school..."

"Th-That wasn't your fault! You had some sorta unavoidable circumstances to deal with, right?!"

"No, I was just playing hooky."

"*Whaaat?!'*"

"Gotcha! I was just kidding, Yuu-chan." She chuckled and stuck out her tongue in a teasing sort of way.

It was her: Ayase Hikari. Normally behaving like that would be unspeakably obnoxious, but somehow, she had a way of making you want to let it slide. That might've just been my own bias talking, though.

In spite of it being her first day back after a long break, Ayase seemed to be in

top form. The way she was joking around and giggling was perfectly natural, and watching her casually mess with Yuuta made it easy to see just how deep their friendship ran.

They chatted peacefully as they sat down at one of the tables, opened up the lunch boxes Yuuta had been so proud of, and started to eat. If Yuuta's info was correct, Ayase had made them herself. In other words, they were the same as the relatively plain but scrumptious-looking lunches that Kaito ate every day... *Ah, dammit, now I'm even hungrier than ever.*

I was a lot more concerned about them—or rather, about Ayase—than I was about the state of my stomach, though. Had she returned to her normal, everyday life without any issues after what I did to her? Was she experiencing any aftereffects? I didn't have any real right to worry about her, considering my involvement, but I did anyway.

C'mon, Yuuta! Question her! Ask her if she's still feeling sick, or something along those lines! Yuuta was the only person in a position to actually question her about it, so I placed all my hopes in her and tried to beam my instructions to her via telepathy. Which didn't work, of course, 'cause telepathy's not real.

"Are you still feeling sick, Hikari-chan?"

Hoooooly crap, it worked?! She actually asked! I mean, it was a natural question to ask in the first place. If an honor student like Ayase goes missing for the better part of a week, it's easy to conclude she must've been sick. Wasn't surprising at all that Yuuta would be thinking along those lines.

"I'm fine!" Ayase replied. "I wasn't sick to begin with. That's not why I missed school."

"It's not?"

"Yeah, but...I don't actually know why I *did*. I know that I had a reason, but I'm not sure what it was."

"Was it all that stuff with Mikura-san?" Yuuta asked after a moment of timid hesitation.

"I mean, that was part of it, I think..."

“Mikura” was one of Ayase’s classmates whose jealousy ended up driving her to subject Ayase to some low-key bullying. It didn’t make any sense for that alone to cause her to cut class, though, and by the look of things Ayase herself was aware of that fact. If she didn’t remember why she’d ended up cutting school, that meant the real reason was about me—or rather, about a certain creepy old pervert. Point is, it had to do with the memories I erased.

“Guess that means it worked,” I mumbled to myself. “Probably.”

“Kunugi-kun? What are you doing?”

“*Aughwhaaa?!*” Somebody tapped me on the shoulder from behind, and I shrieked. I was so focused on eavesdropping on Ayase’s conversation, I completely failed to notice that somebody was approaching *me* in the meantime.

“Huh?! It feels like someone’s watching us!” Yuuta jumped up to scan her surroundings, and I hastily withdrew all the way behind the pillar. Then I turned to look at the girl who’d decided to talk to me.

“Wh-What’s up, Kiryu-san?”

“I feel like I should be asking you that! All I did was talk to you...” I was obviously freaking out, and Kiryu didn’t look very happy about it. “I saw you clutching at this pillar and was worried your raging hormones might’ve been making you act out again.”

“What sorta person do you take me for?!”

“I understand now, though. It was even worse than I thought. I never took you for a kidnapper.”

“A *kidnapper?!* ” I’d been demoted from pillar-molesting pervert to child-snatcher in her mind! Not *really*, of course—judging by how she smiled at my reaction, she was definitely just teasing me. If she’d seen me creeping around like that just a couple weeks back, she would’ve probably flung a couple biting insults *at* me and not even bothered to talk *to* me at all.

“So, why are you spying on Hikari-san?” she asked.

“‘Hikari-san’? You know her?”

“I do, yes. She’s Ayase-kun’s sister and her grade’s class representative, after all. I’ve spoken with her a number of times in passing.” Hikari had earned the right to be the class representative by getting the top score on her entrance exam, and Kiryu had done the same the year before. It wasn’t totally implausible for that shared experience to lead to the two of them touching base with each other.

“Exactly—she’s Kaito’s sister, and speaking as her older brother’s best friend, it’s only natural for me to worry if she’s doing okay after she skipped school without explanation.”

“In other words, you’re being a snoop.”

“You could say that.” In the sense that she was a notable figure and I was part of the riffraff, “snooping” expressed the distance between the two of us pretty perfectly. Like I was the paparazzi or something.

“From what I understand, yesterday was her first day back at school,” continued Kiryu.

“Pretty rare for you to have info on one of your kouhais, isn’t it?”

“Ayase-kun and Kotou-san told me, that’s all.”

I paused, shocked. “Kaito did? But he didn’t say anything to *me* at all!”

“Why would you be jealous about that? It’s your own fault for being absent on the day she came back.” *Harsh, but fair!* It *would* be sorta weird to contact a guy who’s at home sick to tell him that your sister’s back at school after being out for a week. Can’t exactly post it on social media either—you’d get chewed out for spreading private info online.

“In any case,” Kiryu sighed, “*you’ve* certainly bounced back quickly. Considering how bad you looked yesterday, I almost can’t believe it.”

“They say that boys in puberty change so quickly, you might not even recognize ‘em if you go a couple days without seeing ‘em!”

“It hasn’t even been a full day since I saw you, and that’s not even remotely the same thing regardless.” She was back to half-glaring at me. I felt a bead of sweat drip down my brow.

“W-Well, the point is that there’s more to me than meets the eye. Anyway, I’ve actually got more important things to be doing right now, so—”

“‘More important things’?” She grabbed me by the shoulders. *H-Holy crap, why’s she being so intense all of a sudden?!* “You do *not* have ‘more important things.’ Do you have *any* idea how worried I was after you ran out yesterday? You left your phone behind, so I couldn’t even call you!”

“Err, I mean, you see—”

“The president and I were chatting over snacks after you left, and we were both worried that you might’ve been so shocked by, well, *you-know-what* that you might’ve tried to kill yourself!”

“Yeah, okay, sorry about... ‘Over snacks’?! Sounds like you were pretty calm after all!”

“They say that good things come to those who wait, don’t they?” *Welp, didn’t think that expression would end up turning against me today! Dunno if it really applies in this context, but I can’t argue against it either. Curse this girl and her smarty-pants wiles!* “Anyway, the truth is that the president stopped me from going after you. She said that it was too dangerous to go running around in the dark, so we should leave it to her people.”

“Makes sense, I guess.”

“And thanks to that, I ended up having to deal with her all night long...”

“Hot!” An image jumped into my mind: Kiryu and Renge, lying on a king-sized bed, limbs entwined in a beguilingly seductive manner. Feels like the sort of scene that girls would be into more than guys, though, especially if we had Kiryu crossdress for it...

“You’re thinking about something weird, aren’t you?” She pinched my cheek (with her nails!) and the bedroom scene dissolved into mental mist.

“Am not!”

“For the record, I did end up staying over at her house, but nothing in particular happened between us. The worst I could say of the experience is, well...” Her sentence trailed off halfway. Kiryu blushed and looked away from

me.

“I knew it—something sexy totally happened after all!”

“It did *not*!” She went after both my cheeks, nails and everything. It hurt, but to an outside observer, it probably looked like I was grinning! Or it would’ve—if it weren’t for the tears in my eyes. *Ow*.

My body might’ve been unusually healthy thanks to the mana that dwelled within it, but under normal circumstances I was still just a totally ordinary human. Painful things were still painful, and my tear glands worked just fine. As did my stomach, which grumbled with all the force and volume of an orchestra’s bass section. Kiryu paused, cocked her head, and let go of my cheeks.

“Are you hungry?” I rubbed my still-stinging cheeks with both hands as I nodded vigorously. “I have some sandwiches... Would you like one?”

“For real?!”

“For real.”

She smiled kindly. It was the smile of a saint; a smile most men would fall for on the spot. Her carrot-and-stick treatment got me good, and I would’ve just *wallowed* in that expression if I could’ve.



“Man, it’s been ages since I’ve had your cooking, Hikari-chan... All the shame and misery I had to live through to get to this point finally feels like it was worth it...”

“That’s a bit much, Yuu-chan.”

I shivered as I dug into the sandwich that Kiryu gave me. I could clearly hear Ayase and Yuuta shouting and giggling as they ate their own lunches behind me.

“What?” said Kiryu, who was sitting so close to me that our shoulders were almost touching and giving me a casual glare. *Just how many different glares does this girl have up her sleeve, anyway? She’s got quite the repertoire.* “You’re the one who said you’d taken an interest in those two, aren’t you?”

“Great phrasing there—definitely not gonna cause *any* misunderstandings.”

“I think I’m on the verge of misunderstanding something, myself.”

“Yeah, guess you would be.” I felt my cheeks grow even hotter and redder than they were when she pinched me. *Wonder why? Who can say! It’s a real mystery!* “Anyway, are you really sure about this? Aren’t we way too close?”

“The best place to hide a tree is in a forest.”

“You’re just saying that ’cause you think it sounds cool! The forest doesn’t help if the tree’s literally right next to you!” We were, in fact, more or less right next to them. Specifically, we were sitting on a bench that was installed right near their table, facing away from it. Our backs were turned to them, sure, but that was all we had going for us stealth-wise.

“It’s not as bad as you’re making it sound,” she argued. “It’s not like we’re all that distinctive from behind or anything.”

“What, a looker like you? I could pick you out of a crowd from the back of your head, no sweat.”

“O-Oh, really...? I could do the same with you, though!”

“Is this a competition now?” Kiryu took a bite out of her sandwich and pointedly didn’t reply. The conversation ground to a halt.

Ayase and Yuuta, in contrast, were still merrily chatting away as they enjoyed their happy little lunchtime. Nothing in their conversation was particularly interesting, though I did take note of how Yuuta was extolling the virtues of Ayase’s lunch box with the tone and vocabulary of a gourmet food reviewer.

“They sound like they’re having fun,” noted Kiryu with a slight smile.

“Oh, huh. Didn’t think you were the type to care about whether or not other people enjoy stuff.”

“Do you *want* to get pinched again?”

“Oh, Kiryu-sama, how wondrous a person you are! Oh, how my heart is moved by your kindness and affection!” *Yup, there’s the carrot and stick again. She’s got me for sure.* “But yeah, agreed. Kind of a relief to see them like this.”

“Right... Now then, about yesterday. Explain.”

“You really don’t let yourself get sidetracked, do you?” That said, I couldn’t *completely* dodge the question. As long as I left out all the bargain-bin fantasy novel nonsense about magic and alternate worlds, it’d probably be fine to fill her in.

So I did! I tinkered with the details, of course—the way I framed it to her, I’d bumped into Kazuki mid-chase and ended up letting the old creeper escape as a result, but all that running cleared my head and I ended up getting over the whole debacle when all was said and done.

Kiryu looked more than a touch skeptical. “Really? You’re telling the truth?”

“Yeah, and I know, it’s hard to believe. I barely even believe it myself, and I was there.” It ranked so low on the plausibility scale, even I had to admit it. If going for a run to clear your head was enough to heal that sort of emotional damage, all the therapists of the world would’ve been better off going into sports instruction instead.

“By the way, who is this ‘Kazuki’ person?”

“You don’t know her? First-year, genius runner, ace of the track team?”

“I don’t know any of the first-years. I mean, except for Ayase-kun’s sister. She’s the only one I ever come into contact with.”

“Huh, weird. Thought she was pretty famous...” You didn’t have to be tuned in to the rumor mill to have heard about how she figuratively kicked the crap out of the rest of the track team right after she started at our school. All the more so considering her looks! On the other hand, it wasn’t all *that* surprising that somebody like Kiryu wouldn’t know about her if she didn’t have any specific, personal connection with her.

“So then,” Kiryu continued, “you decided that our concern about you was less important than spending quality time with this beautiful track star?”

“I mean, if you’re trying to make it sound nasty, I guess you could say that.”

“Of course I am.”

I hesitated. “Are you, uhh, angry?”

“Angry? Why should I have to be angry with the likes of *you*?” *Yup, she’s*

angry all right. That's the sort of roundabout phrasing people only use when they're genuinely pissed. She sighed, then continued. "You're unbelievable, really. I don't know why I bothered worrying in the first place."

"Sorry about that."

"I ended up wasting the better part of a day and half a sandwich on top of that."

"Sorry about that too." Time is money, and grudges over food can get pretty scary. I was in an incredibly disadvantageous position.

"You'll have to compensate me appropriately, of course."

"Sorry about...huh?"

"I don't like leaving debts unclaimed. Y-You have to pay back at least as much as you borrow, right?" She was talking noticeably faster than usual and avoiding eye contact to boot. She sounded like a clerk at a national bank or something. Not that I've ever talked with one of those. "S-So I'll give you the chance to pay me back someday soon! You'll be treating me to a meal, of course."

"O-Okaaaay? Sure..." I wasn't totally sold on her logic—hell, I'm not even totally sure I understood it—but her face lit up at my response, so it looked like she wasn't angry anymore, at least.

"I'll look forward to it, then!"

"G-Great."

At that point she jumped up off the bench, apparently having said her piece. She almost looked like she was skipping as she left the courtyard. If I didn't know better, I'd have probably gotten the wrong idea... But before I could follow that train of thought any further, it was blown from my mind as I heard Yuuta start yelping behind me.

"Ahh! Oh jeez, we're in trouble, Hikari-chan! Our fifth-period class is in a different room than usual! We gotta move all our stuff!"

"I moved my things already, actually..."

"You *what?! Traitor!*"

“Oh, come on, really?”

“Anyway, we’ve gotta get back to the classroom! C’mon, hurry, hurry!”

“Wait, don’t run! You’re going to trip!” They almost sounded like a mother and her tragically dim, misbehaving child. A moment later, Yuuta sprinted right past me. Thanks to the back of my head being thoroughly nondescript, she didn’t notice me at all and ran off on her way without even pausing to look.

“Really, that girl...” Ayase followed along after her. Needless to say, she didn’t take note of me either. She *couldn’t*, in any case—her memories of me were dead and gone, so even if she happened to turn around and look at me, she wouldn’t pay me any mind.

And then, at just the right moment, a sudden gust blew through the courtyard. It wasn’t one of those mischievous bursts that come up from below and flip skirts, though. Just a perfectly normal, unremarkable gust. More of a breeze, even—a pleasant, refreshing wind to relieve us of the summer heat for the slightest of moments.

And yet that pleasant breeze caused Ayase to stop in her tracks. It had been just enough of a disturbance to make her drop the little case she kept her chopsticks in. She crouched down to grab it, glanced up, and, by pure coincidence, our eyes met.

“Ah...”



Seeing her head-on, from right up close, I found that she looked exactly the same as she had the night before last. And, I mean, duh, it was just two days ago. Even boys in puberty need at least a day or two more than that to change so much you wouldn't recognize them. Of *course* she'd basically look the same.

Weirdly enough, though, I *felt* something as I looked her in the eye. She brought *someone* to mind, but I couldn't put my finger on who. All that I knew was that they were someone really important to me—someone I hadn't seen in a long, long time.

Ayase, meanwhile, was frozen in place, still reaching down for her chopstick case, her eyes locked onto mine. A chill ran down my spine as I worried that she might've remembered me, somehow, but it quickly became apparent that wasn't the case. If she'd remembered me, she surely would've said my name or gotten mad about what I'd done to her a few nights back.

It wasn't an "I remember you" sort of look—more of an "I swear I've met you somewhere before, but I can't quite put my finger on it" one. Like how people look when they're mid-déjà vu. I was simultaneously glad and disappointed that she didn't know who I was. Really conflicted, all around.

She was still frozen in place, probably on account of the fact that I was staring a hole in her face. If just one of us broke eye contact, our weird little moment would end in an instant, and the flow of time would resume once more. For some reason I still can't explain, though, neither of us did.

Of course, in reality, time never stopped flowing in the first place. The bell rang, signaling that we had five minutes to wrap up lunch and get to class. That snapped us back to reality.

"A-Ah..." stammered Ayase. "E-Excuse me!" She grabbed her chopstick case and jogged off. I, in contrast, stayed frozen.

She'd gone through the whole déjà vu process when she saw my face—I knew that for sure from her expression. There was also that time when I went to my old hometown—Shusen City—with Kiryu and remembered the nickname that the old me used to call her. It seemed reasonable to conclude that my power to erase memories didn't *completely* wipe the slate clean.

But what about *me*? Why did *I* feel that incredibly powerful sense of nostalgia as I looked at her? I certainly couldn't recall erasing any of my own memories about her. Even presuming I'd met her when I was a kid, the same was true of Kiryu, and I never felt anything of the sort when I looked at her. It didn't feel like a plausible explanation.

I hadn't forgotten anything. I *hadn't*, and yet somehow, I was still on the verge of remembering *someone*. I just didn't know who, and the more I thought about it, the more a painful, suffocating sensation built up within my chest. A gradually growing pressure, intense enough to make some warm, unidentifiable liquid build up in the corners of my eyes...

Even after the rest of the students returned to the courtyard, even after the bell rang again to signal the start of classes, I stayed parked on the bench, not moving a muscle.

Study Parties Are as School-Life Rom-Com as It Gets

“Hey Kou, wanna walk home together?” I was awakened by Kaito, who tapped me on the shoulder. “Nodded off, huh? Guess you’re still recovering after all.”

“Nah,” I replied. “I’m fine, just spacing out for a bit.” The school day was over before I knew it, and more than half of my classmates had already vanished from the room. Kaito was ready to follow in their footsteps, with his bag all packed up and slung over his shoulder. His ever-present follower Kotou, however, was nowhere to be seen.

“Does Kotou have club activities today?”

“No, but she said that she’d be doing something with Kiryu after school.”

“Oh? Hmm.” I was all for the two of them getting along, but I wasn’t exactly impressed with them for going off on their own and leaving Kaito behind. It brought Kazuki to mind, though I was clinging to the hope that there was still a lingering bud of affection in her just waiting to blossom. *Anyway, whatever! I’ll just take the chance to keep the protagonist all to myself today!* “Wait just a sec, I’ll pack my stuff up.”

“I’m not in a hurry, so you don’t have to... Oh. Well, never mind.” I shoved my pencil case into my bag and was done before he could finish his sentence. Kaito cracked a sort of strained smile at my characteristically sloppy routine. He was probably impressed (in a certain sense of the word) with my decision to leave my textbooks behind, even though tests were coming up the very next week.

“You been studying enough lately, Kaito? You’re already a second-year, y’know? Screw up here, and your summer vacation might end up being a miserable hell of supplemental lessons!”

“Can’t believe *you’re* worried about *me*, Kou.”

“Say what?!”

“You’ve missed how many days of school lately? And even when you do show

up, you don't really pay attention. Heck, you were late for fifth period just this afternoon." *Welp. Can't argue with that.* "We're worried about you, seriously. What if you get held back a year?"

"Oh, c'mon, they wouldn't *really* hold me back, would they...?"

"I sure hope not." He gave me a look that told me he wasn't convinced, and I broke out in a cold sweat. Characters cut class all the time in manga and don't face any real consequences, but if you actually try it at a college-prep school like mine, you end up standing out in a bad way. The school's grade average is high, which makes it all the easier to accidentally sink to the bottom of the pack.

"A-Anyway, I'll be okay as long as I do well enough on the tests! You know me, Kaito—I'm the sort of student who does just fine when he's actually motivated."

"Yeah, I know. But that also means that you *won't* do just fine if you *aren't* motivated."

"Ugh..." *Once again: can't argue with that.* His logic was just too sound.

I decided not to press the issue, pulled my textbooks out from the compartment beneath my desk, and dropped them into my bag. I wasn't sure if I'd *actually* use them to study when I got home or not, but I figured I should at least put on a pretense of motivation. Kaito, of course, saw through me immediately and heaved a heavy, pained sigh.

"I don't *want* to end up a grade above you, y'know? I can't promise I won't smack you on reflex if you ever call me 'Senpai.' Actually, I can promise that I *will*."

"You're gonna get suspended if you go around punching your kouhais for no reason."

"I wouldn't *actually* punch you. I'd just never talk to you again."

"Cruel!" The protagonist handed down a surprisingly harsh judgment call. I mean, I guess it *has* been a trend in recent years to have secretly sadistic protagonists who're only nice to girls and treat other guys as stepping stools, or worse. I'd never considered the possibility that Kaito might go down that path, and I also didn't want to...

“Anyway, that’s how it is, Kou. I have an idea, though!”

“An idea?”

“I’m planning a study party at my house tomorrow, and you should come! That way you’ll be able to get nice and ready for the tests.”

“A study party...” I was starting to put the pieces together. Kaito had brought up the possibility of me getting held back, becoming his kouhai, *etc.* for the sake of bringing the conversation to this point. Crafty of him. In short: he really *was* worried about me. *Man, Kaito’s such a great dude... I’d fall for him in a heartbeat if he were a girl.*

“Tsumugi, Kyouka, and Renge-san will all be there, by the way.”

“Hmm, I see, I see...” *Yup, nothing but beautiful girls. Saw that coming a mile away.* With a lineup like that, he could’ve sold tickets for five-figure prices and still would’ve sold out in a day. “The president’s coming, though? Man, she must be really bored. No way a third-year’s getting much out of a study party full of underclassmen.”

“She’s going out of her way to make time for us, man. Don’t be rude about it. Plus, she was actually pretty enthusiastic. I guess she thinks it’ll be good practice for her entrance exams.”

“Zat so?” I was already well aware that trying to curb Renge’s whims would be a waste of effort.

Kaito was totally unaware that Renge and I were related, of course, at least as far as I knew. The only people at Oumei High who *did* know were a few teachers and Kiryu, thanks to Renge herself outing us the other day. If anything, Kaito was probably under the impression that Renge and I hated each other’s guts. He wouldn’t be totally wrong either, in a certain sense.

“Just checking though, Kaito—you realize that you’ve got a full collection of hotties coming to this study group, right? Wouldn’t I just get in the way if I showed up?”

“How could you get in the way? This is all for you—you’d be the leading man!”

“I’m not the leading man type.”

“That’s neither here nor there. Look, the point’s that right now, you’re the one person in my social circle who’s most likely to fail—actually, make that in the whole school!”

“If you could end up with a leading part by being a problem student, the entire student body would cut class every day.”

“If that logic held true, we’d have a lot more people running around committing crimes just for the sake of ending up on the front page of the newspaper.”

I paused. “When’d you get so good at fast-talking?”

“I’ve been hanging out with you for a year, Kou. It was inevitable. Oh, and there’s also this,” he said as he pulled out his smartphone. He grinned as he flashed its screen at me, which displayed an eleven-digit number with “Daimon-sensei” written right above it.

“Dang, you managed to get that stone-cold sorceress’s phone number? Nice going, Kaito! Never thought you’d go for our fair teacher in the end!”

“You’re definitely misinterpreting this in the weirdest way possible.”

“No, it’s fine, dude. I won’t judge! Kasumi-chan’s got a lotta points in her favor! She’s an adult in name, but she’s still in her twenties and a real looker. Plus, adults’re more broad-minded and better at taking care of people! She’s smart, she’s got money... I could go on for *days* about everything she’s got going for her.”

“Seriously, it’s not like that. I got her phone number for your sake, Kou.”

“For *me*?” What would I gain from Kaito having our homeroom teacher’s personal phone number? The only thing I could come up with on the spot was ordering pizza in her name to get back at her for all the times she chewed me out.

“I talked with her in advance, and if you try to bail on us tomorrow, I’ll be giving her a call about it.”

“Huh?”

“Then she’ll find you and drag you to my place.”

“She...actually agreed to that? Is that really appropriate teacher behavior?”

“Who knows about the second part, but as far as the first goes, she said she was free this weekend, so sure.” Hearing that she’d be free over the weekend struck me as hopelessly tragic. *I’ll have to jot down some info about one of those dating apps that’re all the rage on a worksheet and throw it in her face one of these days.*

“All right, fine,” I sighed. “I can’t go stealing one of a twenty-something-year-old’s precious remaining days off, so I give in. I’ll come along willingly.”

“That’s a relief.”

And so, my plans for the next day were established (by way of coercion). *Really, though, a student’s job is to study. Plus, having the tests to set my sights on and use as a goal could actually be good for me. The more I focus on that, the less time I’ll have to worry about other stuff.*

Even if the protagonist’s present and the guests are all hotties, a study party’s still just a study party in the end. “How was I supposed to know that it would end up like *that*?” is not a piece of narration I figured I’d have any need for that time around. I was living in a peaceful world, after all—a world in which insane, novel-like twists just didn’t come up very often.



“Man, my internal clock’s accurate to a fault!”

I woke up bright and early at precisely 8 a.m. on the day of the study party, no problem whatsoever. Normally that’d mean that I was late, but with it being Saturday, I feel like not sleeping in until noon was praiseworthy, if anything. *Nice going, me!*

“We were supposed to meet up at ten, and our meeting place was less than twenty minutes away. Most people would use that as an excuse to go back to bed. *Most people would...but I’m not most people!*”

“Nope, you sure aren’t. Gonna be honest, you showing up early’s not something I saw coming at all,” Kaito grumbled as he sleepily rubbed his eyes.

He was still wearing his pajamas, and his bedhead was really something—he'd probably *just* woken up.

The moment I got out of bed, I'd rushed through my morning routine and dashed out towards Kaito's house. And I mean, like, *really* dashed, or at least walked double-time. As for *why* I'd do something so out-there in the first place... Okay, fine, I admit it: petty revenge for forcing me to come. It really was just an impulse.

"Sooo, does starting an hour early mean I get to leave an hour early too?" I asked hopefully.

"No," Kaito bluntly declared as he plodded back into his house. I followed along after him.

"Did your sister already leave?"

"Hmm? Mngh..." Kaito grunted vaguely in reply, but he also nodded, which cleared things up.

I hadn't actually asked in advance about whether or not Ayase Hikari would be home that day, but I knew from past experience that the odds were very good she wouldn't be around. We'd had a number of study parties back when we were first-years, and Kaito always scheduled them on days when she'd be out and about.

He never actually explained why, but I sort of assumed that he thought it'd be in poor taste to have a casual, friendly study group lord it up in front of her while she was hitting the books hard for her entrance exam... *Wait. Huh? Wouldn't that mean it's not a problem anymore since she's in high school now...?*

"Want some coffee, Kou?"

"Ah, sure." *Meh, whatever. She's not around regardless, so it all worked out in the end...* Or so I tried to tell myself, keeping the fact that I was actually super nervous about it out of my internal monologue. "Kaitooo, gimme breakfast!"

"Maybe if you'd eaten at home, you wouldn't have been quite so early..."

"My pure and maidenly heart drove me to rush out and meet with my best

friend as soon as possible!”

“Gross.” *Now that’s how a real protagonist snaps at someone!* Kaito was still a kind person at heart, though, and benevolently granted me a bowl of rice. *See? He’s nice to guys too! Didn’t give me a portion of grilled fish and a bowl of miso soup to go with it, but hey, it’s still something.* That peaceful, laid-back atmosphere wouldn’t last, though.

“Gah, it’s this late already?” noted Kaito. Time had flown by, and it was already ten minutes till ten. He quickly washed off the dishes, then dashed upstairs. He probably didn’t want to welcome the heroines into his home with a bad case of bedhead.

“Can you answer the door if someone rings the bell, Kou?”

“Sure,” I replied listlessly from the couch I’d collapsed onto. My initial overenthusiasm had worn off, and laziness, irritability, and sleepiness were rushing in to take its place. My absolute earliest chance to get out of there would probably be in an hour or so. If I made my move any earlier than that, my homeroom teacher would get summoned, and the study party I *already* didn’t want to be at would turn into an absolute living hell.

“Kou? Can you get the door?” Kaito’s voice rang out from the second floor. Apparently, the bell had rung. I’d been so occupied by praying that it wouldn’t that I hadn’t heard it at all.

“Okay, okay,” I mumbled. “Be right there...” I stood up and plodded towards the door, feeling incredibly lethargic. I figured that this must be how old men who’ve reached retirement age, moved into their married kid’s home, and totally lost all motivation must feel. *Not something I wanted to experience at this stage of my life, thanks!* “If you’re selling newspapers, we have enough already...”

“Kou!”

“Whaugh?!” The second I opened the door, a girl burst in and embraced me. For a moment, I was overwhelmed by her fragrance, softness, and warmth.

“Kou, it’s really you! Thank goodness! You’re all better now, aren’t you?!”

“R-Renge-san?! Wh-What’re you doing?!”

“Oh, enough with the ‘-san’! Don’t be so distant! You can call me Renge-onee-chan, like always!”

“When have I *ever* called you that?!”

It was Renge, and her attitude was *completely* unlike how she usually acted around me. She was being ridiculously clingy. I mean, I guess that back when I first met her she’d forced herself to be clingy in order to thaw the block of rock-hard ice that was my heart, but it really was just an act back then. All that excessiveness was a matter of necessity, and I couldn’t think of any good reason why she’d have to go that far *now*.

And yet go that far she did, hugging me as tightly as she could and pulling my face into her chest. She was petting my hair like you’d pet one of those big, poofy dogs. And it didn’t feel good at all. Actually, she was pulling on my hair pretty badly—*okay ow, ow, OW! Stoppit!*

“Kooou! Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good boy?!”

“What am I, your pet?!”

“Oh, my pet, that’s a good idea! I can put a collar on you, have you live in a cage, and brag about you online!”

“Oh my god, that went off the rails *so fast!*”

“Kou? What’s going on down there?” Kaito, drawn by the ruckus we were kicking up, came down the staircase. *O-Oh, crap! Kaito thinks that Renge and I hate each other... I mean, okay, he thinks that I have a super intense one-sided grudge against her, so if he sees her hugging me like this we’ll be in serious hot water!*

“Good morning to you, Ayase-kun.”

“Oh, Renge-san! Good morning.”

“Wait, when’d you let go?!” *L-Like, seriously, I swear I was drowning in boobs literally a split second ago!* It was like that thing you see in cartoons where a character runs right off a cliff, doesn’t notice, and gets to keep running until they finally look down and gravity kicks in. She’d broken away a long time

before, but the sensation remained until I noticed... *Are her boobs just that overwhelming?!*

“Let go of what, now?” asked Kaito, quizzically.

“Err, ah, umm... Her preference for printed text over digital media?”

“Her *what?*” Kaito rolled his eyes in a jovial way while Renge sighed with exasperation. Kaito was one thing, but it was really irritating to get that sort of treatment from *her*, considering. “You got here pretty early today, huh, Renge-san?” he continued.

“Yes, since it’s all too common for some unexpected matter to call me away at a moment’s notice, I thought it would be best to arrive as early as possible.”

“That so? Well, I really appreciate you going to the trouble. Oh, and you don’t have to stand in the entryway forever; come on in! We’ve got a pretty big group today, so I figured we’d set up in the living room.”

Kaito hustled the rest of the way down the staircase. Renge smiled innocently, though from my perspective, she still looked pretty fishy. Incidentally, Kaito had changed into a stylish set of casual clothing.

“That wouldn’t suit you, Kou,” Renge whispered as she walked past me, her lips so close to my ear they were almost touching it. “You aren’t tall enough for an outfit like that.”

“Hey, who said I was jealous...? And hey, stop reading my mind!” *Yeah, okay, so super slim, stylish pants like those might look weird on me... Actually, wait, do stylish people even call them “pants”? Don’t they have, like, specific names? Like jeans, or briefs, or chinos, or boxers, or capris? I wonder if girls’ clothing is like that too? Like, if you slipped up with your pronunciation just a little when you’re making a wish on the you-know-what balls, could their god end up sending you a fancy skirt instead of a pair of panties? Not that that’d be any worse, necessarily.*

“Oh, hey, you’re here already, Kunugicchi?”

“*Gah?! Kotou?!?*”

“Sup! Kyou-chan’s here too!” She really was. The two of them had shown up

in the entryway before I knew it and nearly gave me a heart attack in the process.

“Good morning, Kunugi-kun,” said Kiryu. “I have to admit, I was so certain you’d be late that I couldn’t believe my eyes for a moment when I saw you.”

“Funny, considering I thought I was hallucinating for a second when I saw *you*.” The fact that I’d been so distracted by Renge I hadn’t even noticed the other two walk in made me seriously worried that they might’ve witnessed something that could let them pick up on our relationship.

“Hmm?” Kotou glanced down. “Aren’t those the president’s high heels? Is she already here...?”

“Not even gonna try to pretend you’re happy about that, huh?” I sighed. “Also, thanks.”

“Why are you thanking her for something like *that*, Kunugi-kun?” Kiryu furrowed her brow suspiciously. I’d actually forgotten for a minute there, but it suddenly hit me that she was one of the very few people in the know about Renge being my second cousin.

It was probably pretty confusing to see me thank Kotou right after she made it clear that she wasn’t a fan of my relative. Truthfully, I was just thanking her because her comment had cleared things up for me: she wouldn’t have reacted like that if she’d already seen Renge, so I knew for a fact that she hadn’t witnessed anything unfortunate.

“I knew it—you’re the only one on my side, Kunugicchi! Not even Kyou-chan understands how I feel!”

“Huh...?” murmured Kiryu, still confused. “What do you mean by that, Kotou-san?”

“You don’t know what it’s like, Kyou-chan... You’re one of the big-boobied; you’ll never understand how we feel!”

“Hold the phone, Kotou!” I interjected. “You’re making it sound like *I’m* jealous of Kiryu’s huge boobs, and for the record, I’m not!”

“What?! But I thought we were comrades in the Tiny Titty Alliance!”

“I’ve never even heard of it! And guys have tiny titties by default!”

“You know you’re both sexually harassing me right now? Especially you, Kunugi-kun.” Kiryu glared at us, her gaze packed to the brim with utter and complete contempt. In my defense, A: Kotou totally started it and dragged me into this mess, and B: the *real* lewd element in the room was Kiryu’s boobs! The way she was crossing her arms over them to hide them just made them even lewder! I wasn’t being lewd at all, no siree.

“Oh, Tsumugi, Kyouka! Morning, you two—come on in!” called Kaito from the living room.

“Morning, Kaito!” replied Kotou.

“Good morning, Ayase-kun. Thank you for inviting me today, and thank you for allowing me into your home as well.” Okay, Kotou was one thing, but the way Kiryu greeted Kaito was transparently friendlier than how she greeted me! *Like, c’mon, she’s gotta be a heroine after all, right? She’s an ice-cold tsundere-honor-student-class-president-type, right?* With that thought in mind, I hung back and whispered into Kiryu’s ear as Kotou jogged into the living room.

“You know you can call him ‘Kaito-kun,’ right? He’s been calling you by your first name for ages!”

“What? Why would you bring that up now?”

“Just feels like it’s about time for you and Kaito to start getting closer to each other, y’know?”

“I *know* that it’s none of your business,” she snapped. *Of course it’s my business! A best friend sidekick’s primary responsibility is to gauge the status of the relationships between the protagonist and all his heroines! It’s literally my job!* It was still absolutely none of my business in the way she meant the phrase, of course.

“And besides,” she continued, “if we’re going to talk about first names, wouldn’t it make more sense for the two of us to use them with each other first?”

“What, *us*? Nah, I think we’re good. I mean, ‘Kiryu’ and ‘Kunugi’ have a sorta catchy ring together, don’t they?”

“I have no clue what standard you’re judging that by...”

“They both start with K?”

“So do Kyouka and Kou.”

“Good point. You’ve got a good eye for these things, Kiryu.”

“Well, thank you for that, I guess!” she spat, seemingly irritated, then headed into the living room. I wondered for a moment what I might’ve done to piss her off, but quickly concluded that I’m so irritating in so many different ways that narrowing it down would be next to impossible, if I do say so myself. I should probably just be thankful she hadn’t smacked me.

Thus did our members gather and our study party commence! Being the exemplary students we were, the moment our scheduled start time arrived some of us sat down around the dining room table, while the rest sat at the smaller, shorter table by Kaito’s couch. Then we all spread out our textbooks and began poring over them. We were mostly self-motivated—we all studied for the tests we were the least prepared for, and if we had any questions, we had our resident teachers to turn to.

“Hey, Kyou-chan, i-it’s not like I want you to teach me how to answer this question or anything!”

“Please, *please* just ask me normally, Kotou-san.”

“Renge-san, I’m not sure I understand this part... Can you help me out?”

“Yes, of course, Ayase-kun.”

Kiryu and Renge, our resident honor students, could solve pretty much every problem we could throw at them. They weren’t *literally* teachers, of course, but that actually sort of helped. Learning from your peers makes it much easier to see from each other’s perspectives. From what I understood, a lot of students at our school would’ve paid good money to join in on one of our gatherings.

“Is there anything you’d like me to explain to you, Kunugi-kun?” asked Kiryu.

I hesitated for a moment. “Nope, not really. I’m good.”

“Oh, now isn’t *that* impressive,” chimed in Renge. “You might just be in

danger of losing your position atop your grade's test rankings, don't you think, Kiryu-san?"

"I can't rule it out. Even I have subjects I'm not entirely confident in."

"I know you two're messing with me! Cut it out!" Look, knowing what you don't know yet's actually pretty hard in and of itself! We who can't can't tell what we can and can't do! Okay, this is getting obnoxious—moving on!

"But considering he's refusing help on the whole," amended Kiryu, "it seems safe to assume he doesn't even know what he could use help with... If anything, he may very well end up being the lowest-ranking student in our grade."

"Oh, my, that's impressive!"

"That's one word for it. We should probably leave it at that."

There's a one hundred percent chance that Renge's "impressive" there was a sarcastic attempt to get a rise out of me. The first one was too, by the way. She just keeps taking provocative potshots, but too bad for her, 'cause I have absolutely nothing to fire back with, even if I wanted to!

"Anyway, Kunugi-kun, do tell me if you have any questions about anything at all," said Kiryu, more seriously this time. "We organized this whole study party to help *you* out, after all."

"About *anything at all*? Okay, I've got one! Kiryu-sensei, what're your measurements?!"

"Die."

"Die"? Oh, I get it; it's code for something! Okay, I've got this—a normal die has six sides. Next up... Nope, that's it, outta ideas. Come on, Kou, stay calm and think! There's a hint hidden in there somewhere!

Kotou chimed in right around then. "That one was your fault, Kunugicchi. Straight-up sexual harassment. You really should just drop dead."

"Oh, you meant *that* 'die'?"

"What else could you have possibly thought she was talking about...?" *Well, I didn't think somebody would wish death upon me for asking for their measurements! If that were a capital punishment-worthy offense, then all the*

lingerie-shop workers, doctors, and talent scouts in the world would be wiped out! “Anyway, point is that was *your* bad. But on the *other* hand, Kyou-chan, you *did* say that he could ask you anything at all, and it’d be a really bad look if you totally refuse to answer! So how about you tell him your bust size and call it even?”

Oh, that sneaky little snake.

“W-Wait a second, Kotou-san?! You’re not serious, are you?”

“Just look, Kunugicchi’s all depressed now! He won’t be able to study at all at this rate!”

“B-BuT, sniff, sHe Sald *aNYthiNg*, sob, boo hoo.”

“You’re just pretending to cry, and you’re terrible at it.” Kiryu rolled her eyes.

“Sniff, nO I’M nOt, sob, I’m ReaLIY CryiNg, sniff, PLeAse bELiEVe mE.”

Renge chuckled. “Kunugi-kun, you sound less like you’re pretending to cry and more like you’re pretending to be a foreigner who doesn’t know Japanese.”
Man, acting’s hard. The world of the performing arts is a deep one indeed.
UnBEliEvAbLe.

“Okay, let’s put Kunugicchi’s super pathetic attempt at acting aside for now,” cut in Kotou. “You’re up, Kyou-chan! Bust size, please!”

Kiryu sighed heavily. “You can’t seriously think I’d say it *here*? Ayase-kun is sitting right there!”

“Wait, me?” Kaito’s eyes widened. He’d been quietly spectating from the sidelines up until that moment, but suddenly he was in the thick of it. I didn’t miss the way his gaze darted to Kiryu’s chest for a split second either.

“Oh, no worries there, Kiryu. Kaito’d *love* to hear all about it,” I helpfully added.

“Wha—*Kou*?!”

“Nope, lemme stop you right there, Kaito. It’s fine, really! Anyone would be interested; it’s nothing to be ashamed of! Everybody loves boobs!”

“I can’t believe it...” Kotou moaned disconsolately. “Even *Kaito*’s betraying me

now? Is nobody left to heal my poor, wounded heart?”

“I, uhh, think you might’ve caught Tsumugi in the crossfire, Kou...” Kaito was right—she’d been the one to bring up Kiryu’s cup size in the first place, but big boobs were still her greatest weakness. *You can’t let yourself get knocked out by your own topic, girl!*

“So you like ‘em big after all in the end, Kaito?!” she raged. “You like big ol’ titties like Kyou-chan’s or the president’s! You stupid oedipedo perv!” *Wow, it takes a real pervert to be horrifying on both ends of the age spectrum!*

“But, I dunno... Yours aren’t even that small, Tsumugi. Is it really that big of a deal?” *Ohhh, no. You just stepped on a landmine, Kaito...*

“Ah... Arggh...”

“Umm, Tsumugi?”

“Even you, Kaitoooooooo?!” Kotou let out a heartbroken wail, then collapsed face-first onto the table. *I see... So that’s what real crying looks like? Thanks for the reference, Kotou.*

“Did I, uhh, say something mean...?” asked Kaito. The “Did I do something wrong?” act was an absolutely classic protagonist staple, but in this particular situation, it made him look just a little bit pathetically oblivious. Not to say that Kiryu or Renge were keeping up with the situation either, by the look of things. I figured it was the right time for me to jump in and lend a helping hand.

“*Laisse-moi*, Kaito.”

“Wait, why the French?”

“Kotou, you see, is an idiot.” *Explanation complete. That should clear everything up. I’d love to see anyone try to sum up the situation more precisely or accurately than—whoa, holy crap!*

A mechanical pencil nearly took my eye out. Kotou, who’d apparently mistaken my face for a dartboard, was beckoning in my direction, still facedown on the table. I glanced at Kiryu, just in case, but Kotou shook her head. I guess she really must’ve been watching me after all, somehow.

“Need something?” I said as I timidly approached her. The moment I was

close enough, she grabbed my sleeve, pulled me right up next to her, and whispered in my ear. “Huh? A message? Why should I have to...oh? Ooooh, interesting! Okay, I get it—I like the way you think!”

I was a bit skeptical of the instructions she whispered to me at first, but as she went on and I sussed out her real intentions, I quickly changed my tune. Hell, I was actually impressed! Impressed enough to exchange a high-five with her, which was also impressive since she was still facedown.

“K-Kou?” stammered Kaito.

“*Laisse-moi, Kaito. Laisse-moi.*”

“Oh my, he’s like a middle schooler who’s just learned a new word,” chimed in Renge, but I had no time for her commentary.

“Silence, titizen!”

“...‘Titizen’?”

“Henceforth, I shall pass down the teachings of the great and honorable scholar Kotou! Perk your ears and prepare to receive her wisdom!” I cleared my throat. Kotou’s words carried a heavy, incredibly profound significance, and I’d need all the adrenaline my body could pump into my veins if I wanted any hope of conveying them properly. I paused for a moment, took a deep breath, then psyched myself up and jumped right in. “In this world, there exist two types of boobs!”

“Umm, Kou...?” Kaito interjected, but I wasn’t about to let him stop me.

“These aren’t my words; they’re the words of the great and venerable Kotou. Now then—Kiryu! What would those two varieties of boobs be?!”

“Wait, *me*?! Considering how the conversation’s gone so far...big ones and small ones, I suppose?”

“Bzzzt!” Kotou (still facedown) and I crossed our arms into “you’re wrong” Xs. I might’ve been imagining it, but I could swear I saw a vein start throbbing in Kiryu’s forehead. Considering her hair was covering said forehead up, yeah, probably just imagining it.

“The correct answer is...boobs that *are* and boobs that *aren’t*!”

“So I was right after all.”

“Tch-tch-tch! We’re not talking in terms of *size*, Kiryu-san!”

“Okay, but still, isn’t that basically—”

“Oh, I understand!” chimed in Renge, cutting Kiryu off. “You mean in terms of value, do you not? Big breasts are desirable, of course, but small ones have the capacity to become a focal point in their own right as well. Kotou-san’s, however, are neither especially big nor especially small—they exist in the liminal space between the two extremes, and thus can lay claim to no particular individuality whatsoever. In other words, they’re virtually meritless.”

“*Gwahuagh?!*” Kotou reeled. Renge, bearer of the biggest boobs in the room, had calmly and cruelly analyzed the situation in excruciatingly accurate detail. Her words hit Kotou with all the force of an especially jiggly body blow. *It’s super effective!*

“Kotou?!” I cried. “H-How could you?! You didn’t have to be *that* brutally direct about it, did you?! Are you a demon, or what?!”

“You’re the one who was making a whole production out of it...” sighed Kiryu. “And besides, Kotou-san, weren’t you trying to drag Kunugi-kun into the ‘Tiny Titty Alliance’ just a moment ago?”

“*Gahaugh?!*”

“Kotou, no! Kiryu, how could you?! What kind of monster kicks a corpse while it’s down?!”

“I have to admit, Kou, Tsumugi really did bring this on herself.”

“Et tu, Kaito?! Hang in there, Kotou! Kotou? Kotooou?!”

Kotou Tsumugi: dead at the age of sixteen. The final blow: dealt by the protagonist himself. In her last moments, her final, deathly wail almost sounded like an attempt to call out someone’s name...

—Kunugi Kou, *Record of a Young Girl’s Death by Self-Destruction*

“Ughh...” Kotou moaned. “At this point, I have no other choice! I’ll have to kill Kunugicchi and live to see another day!”

“How’s killing me gonna help you at all?! And doesn’t that line usually end with ‘I’ll kill him, then myself’?!”

“I know killing you’s a crime, so I’ll own up to it! I’ll do my time!”

“H-Her moral foundation’s totally untouchable!”

“I do believe her moral foundation will have already crumbled at the point where she kills you,” interjected Renge. Her comment flashed through my and Kotou’s minds like a bolt of lightning—*she’s right!*

“So even if I kill Kunugicchi, I’ll still be a loser...?”

“Sorry. Honestly, I haven’t even been keeping up with your logic for the past few lines,” I admitted.

“If Kou can’t keep up, none of us can,” added Kaito. “I couldn’t understand what you were talking about from the very beginning.” He smiled, sure, but his casual admission was inadvertently cruel. *C’mon, Kaito, that’s the part where you give her your best smile and say something like, “I love your boobs, Tsumugi! They’re like cute little rice cakes!☆”*

“Okay, Kotou, I think that’s enough,” I said, sensing an opportunity.

“Everyone’s sick of this bit, so let’s call it here, okay?”

“Not you too, Kunugicchi! B-But, wait, now that I think about it, you’re my last hope! *You* would bow down and worship *any* boobs, even totally unremarkable ones like mine, right? Right...?”

What kind of bizarre expectations do you have of me...? All right, fine, fine! Been a while since I really got serious, so I guess I can pull out the stops and give her a hand.

I took a deep breath, then shouted at the top of my lungs. “Kotou, your boobs are fan-friggin’-tastic! The! Best! They’re big enough to not be small, but small enough to not be big, which means they’re *just right!* People with boobs like yours are *valid!*”

“Hee hee, they are?”

“Hell yeah they are! Of course they are—they’re boobs; that’s literally all it

takes! Every part of ‘boobs’ is utter perfection—from the ‘b’ to the ‘o’ to the other ‘o’ to the other ‘b’ to the ‘s’! Boobs are sublime! Boobs reign supreme!”

I was seriously bellowing at that point. Kotou was giggling bashfully, and absolutely everybody else was *horrified*. Chaos dominated what had once been a perfectly normal study party. *But what happens at Kaito’s house stays at Kaito’s house! It’s better to regret the things you did than regret the things you didn’t! Having come this far, I, Kunugi Kou, feel a clear and unshakable obligation to see this through to the very end!*

“Boobs are everything! In other words...”

“I’m home, Kaito! What’s going on in—”

“BOOBS! ARE!!! FOREVER!!!!!!!!!!!!”

...Huh?

Is it just me, or did somebody other than me say something there?

“H-Hey, Hikari, welcome back! Wh-Why so early? I thought you were going out to study with your friends today?”

“Y-Yeah, I did, but the library’s air conditioner was broken, so...”

Hi-ka-ri? Hikari? As in, Ayase Hikari? Ayase Hikarii?!

She appeared out of absolutely nowhere, and her gaze was locked onto me even while she talked with Kaito. Her eyes were as wide as they could possibly be, and it was incredibly obvious she was more than a little put off. *Wow, I might’ve just made as horrifying an entrance into her life as that awful old guy did! Ha, ha, ha...*

“Oh jeez, way to be a creeper, Kunugicchi!”

Good news, Kotou! I’ll be doing time in your place! Speaking of which, any last words?





Ayase Hikari had arrived with absolutely impeccable timing and two merry comrades in tow, lured to her house by the prospect of studying together. And by “merry comrades,” I mean the shrimp and the track junkie.

“N-N-Nice to m-meet you, I-I’m Yoshiku Yuu. I-I’m, umm, Hikari-chan’s, f-f-friend,” stammered the shortie from her hiding place behind Hikari.

“Heya! Kazuki Rena here. Long time no see, Ayase-senpai! And is that the student council president? Man, didn’t expect to see her here!” Kazuki’s greeting was a lot more direct—she introduced herself with a smile. That said, I could understand Ayase and Yuuta’s presence, but why would Kazuki be with them? As far as I knew, she wasn’t especially acquainted with either of them.

“Oh, wow, she’s *tiny*...and *adorable*! See, I knew it! Tiny ones really *do* give you something special...” murmured Kotou, who’d made a full recovery thanks to my valiant sacrifice. I could practically see the little hearts in her eyes as she stared at Yuuta. *This won’t last, though. Only a matter of time before the attention ends up back on me...*

“Ah, umm, good morning, Renge-san and Kyouka-san,” continued Hikari.

“Good morning to you as well, Hikari-san,” replied Kiryu.

“It’s been quite a while!” added Renge, somewhat more casually. “Have you been well?”

“Ah, yes! I’ve been fine, thanks.”

It was a pretty remarkable scene: the top-scoring students in each grade level were all gathered in one place. They were all beauties too, which seemed just a little too convenient to be a coincidence—what standards are *really* being used behind the scenes in Oumei High’s grading room...?

“And, umm,” Hikari continued, a bit awkwardly, “the boy who’s collapsed over there would be...?”

“Oh, right, that’s Kou,” replied Kaito. “I’ve told you about him before, right?”

“Kou... O-Oh, yes, that’s right! Kou-san—I mean, Kou-senpai.” The exchange was transparently unnatural, but nobody called it out.

All of my interactions with Hikari had taken place in environments where nobody else was around to see us, so in theory, nobody would know about our former relationship beyond the absolute surface-level details. The way I saw it, having everyone else aware that we at least knew each other's names could be a good thing. The plausible deniability would be nice, especially considering certain actions I may have taken which I may have felt pretty guilty about.

It didn't seem like she was being awkward about it because she'd suddenly remembered me, incidentally—rather, she'd forgotten about me entirely but thought it would be rude to admit it and was trying to play along with Kaito. Making the connection between my name and my face hadn't sparked her memory at all. By the way, I *was*, in fact, literally collapsed in a corner from the mental backlash of shouting “boobs are forever” in front of everyone. *Somebody, please, just kill me already.*

“Anyway, don't just stand there,” said Kaito. “C'mon in, have a seat.”

“Sounds good, thanks!” replied Rena.

“E-Excuse us,” added Yuuta, a bit more hesitantly. They both walked into the room, found seats, and sat down.

“R-Rena-chan, it's a little cramped with the both of us,” complained Yuuta.

“Ugh,” I groaned in agreement. Out of all the empty seats in the room, they'd chosen my corpse to use as a couch. Everyone in the room was caught completely off guard (me included, of course).

Kiryu was the first to work up the nerve to call it out. “Umm, Kazuki-san, Yoshiki-san? You *are* aware that's technically a human, right...?”

“Oh, yeah, guess it is,” said Kazuki, shifting around for a more comfortable position. “It was in the perfect spot, so I didn't even think about it!”

“Think you could be a bit more comfy, boob-man?” complained Yuuta as she smacked me on the head. “We're your guests, right? Show some hospitality!” *Even dirty, decades-old mechanical horses at grocery stores make you pay to ride on them, but these people are expecting me to do their bidding without forking over a single coin! Cheapskates! Why're customers always such entitled jerks, anyway?!*

“So, umm, I’m guessing the two of you are friends with Kou-senpai?” asked Hikari.

“Don’t worry, you’ll always be my best friend, Hikari-chan!” exclaimed Yuuta. “I guess you could say he’s my manservant if I had to describe him!” *Her manservant, huh? I guess I did bait her with food, so I can see how she got that impression. Have I been too soft on her...?*

“And Senpai’s my partner!” added Rena.

“Your partner?” asked Kaito.

“Yeah! My training partner!”

“Oh...? When did that happen, Kou?”

“Couldn’t tell you, myself...” *I mean, of course I couldn’t, considering this is the first I’ve heard of it!* I was starting to seriously wonder just how over-inflated Kazuki’s image of me was. Kaito let it drop pretty easily, though, and turned back to his sister.

“Hey, Hikari, do you wanna join in on our study party? Rena and Yuu-chan too, of course. We’re all your senpais here, so I figure we probably have a lot we could teach you.”

“Umm, are you sure?” she replied, a little reluctantly. “Wouldn’t we be a bother?”

“I wouldn’t particularly mind,” replied Kiryu.

“Indeed, I wouldn’t object either,” added Renge.

“*Ooooh*, me too, me too! I totally agree too! Come sit on your senpai’s lap, Yuu-chan!” screamed Kotou.

“I-I’ll pass, thanks...”

“*Nooo!*”

Kaito sighed. “Well, you heard ’em.”

“Y-Yeah. I guess we’ll take you up on that, then... You two don’t mind, do you?”

Kazuki and Yuuta both nodded in agreement. I assume. Couldn’t actually see

it, but I'm pretty sure they were nodding.

And so our study party recommenced! My "boobs are forever" declaration was wiped from the collective memory (or at least put on ice indefinitely) without ever reaching any sort of resolution.

We ended up splitting into three general groups. First up was Team Teacher, formed by Kiryu and Renge: those who were already so prepared they had no need to cram before the tests. They weren't even pretending to glance at their textbooks and occupied themselves by fiddling with their phones or reading. Part of me wondered why they'd even bothered showing up, but at the very least, their knowledge of the lower years' material and the subjects covered by the exams was flawless, meaning they could answer any question you had to throw at them. They ended up being an indispensable resource for the rest of us.

Next up was Team Workbook, composed of Kaito, Kotou, and Kazuki. They were busy solving questions from their workbooks and the handouts our teachers had given us, training their practical skills and studying in the most traditional and practical manner possible. The willingness to put in that sort of slow, straightforward work has a direct correlation to one's scores on the tests, I'm sure.

Last was Team Good-Luck-With-That, made up of Ayase the Younger, Yuuta, and me. Instead of workbooks, we were poring through our textbooks and other people's notebooks. Specifically, I was copying Kiryu's notes while Ayase the Younger copied Yuuta's (and got Yuuta's input on all the lessons that she'd missed). We weren't even at the starting line, as far as studying for the tests went.

Yuuta would *normally* be on Team Workbook, but she had to follow her notebook wherever it went and was too shy to leave her friend's side (or rather her *friends'* side, since she got me as a bonus). Thus, she ended up at our table. Normally I'd be put off by her ridiculously obnoxious neediness, but this time and this time alone, I was actually grateful for it. Having to study alone with Ayase would be "please grant me the sweet release of death" levels of awkward.

That said, though she and I were both dealing with the consequences of a truancy streak, our basic book smarts couldn't possibly have been on more drastically different levels. One of us was eternally average, grade-wise, and the other was the top student in her class. If Ayase was a flower, then I was a weed.

It took me a fair bit of time to even decipher the contents of Kiryu's notebook, but Ayase, in contrast, would assuredly be finished copying Yuuta's notes and would move over to Team Workbook (and eventually even Team Teacher) in a heartbeat. So would begin Ayase Hikari's ironfisted academic dictatorship. She was an upstart, no mistaking it, and once she was gone I'd be left all alone in Team Good-Luck-With-That... *Wait. Wouldn't that be no different than just studying at home?*

Right around then, Yuuta piped up without warning. "It feels so weird to be around both of you at the same time!"

"Huh? D-Does it?" Ayase replied. She seemed a bit shaken, somehow.

"I mean, we *are* in different grade levels," I chimed in, casually shutting down the topic. Internally, though, I was just as freaked out as she was. "You took some time off, right? You feeling better now?"

"I'm...fine."

"That's good to hear. I'm your brother's best friend and all, so I was sorta worried."

"My brother's... Ah, thank you for thinking about me!" I'd completely seized the initiative, and the conversation was firmly under my control. Talking with her was risky, but it also had the potential for a big payoff if I could use the chance to clearly establish the nature of our relationship.

"I was worried too!" chimed in Yuu. "I'm *your* best friend, after all!"

"Thank you too, Yuu-chan. I'm sorry I made you worry."

"I believed in you, Hikari-chan! I knew you'd be all right!"

"Wait, so which is it?" She was worried, but she also believed in her? The contradiction even had Ayase chuckling, but Yuuta didn't seem to get it and cocked her head in confusion.

“Which is what?”

“Y’know what, never mind.”

“That just makes me more curious! Tell me, tell me, tell meee!”

“Have you been cursed or something? Would you drop dead if you didn’t say everything in the most obnoxious way possible?”

“Pffft! Ha ha ha, as *if*! You really believe a curse like that could be real? You’re so immature, Kunugi-san!”

“Oh, it’s on...” Yuuta was, as usual, an absolute prodigy in the field of pissing people off. *I’m gonna dunk this runt’s head through a basketball hoop one of these days—mark my words!*

Hikari, meanwhile, was cracking up. “You two really get along, don’t you?” she managed to choke out between the giggles.

“I guess you could say that!” replied Yuuta.

“Just when did you make friends with each other, though?” she dug deeper, and I froze up for a second. She wasn’t even directing the question at me, but on some level, it still felt like she was probing in a direction I didn’t want her to.

“While you were off from school,” Yuuta answered.

“You weren’t around to feed her, Ayase-san, so she ended up setting her sights on me as your substitute.”

“‘Ayase-san’?” She frowned. “You’re my brother’s best friend, aren’t you? You don’t have to treat me like a stranger.”

“I mean, you basically *are* a stranger.”

“I don’t mind if you think of me as, like, your little sister! You can just call me Hikari.”

“Why would I ever think of you like *that*? We don’t even look anything alike! I have a hard time believing you’d actually want that either—you’d be really creeped out if I said we should take a bath together or whatever, right?”

“I’d be creeped out if my actual brother said that too... Wait, don’t tell me he told you about that?!” *Oh, crap, that’s right! I didn’t hear about Kaito’s little*

why-protagonist-why incident from him; I heard it from the younger, more female him!

“Ah, no, Kaito...” I was about to pin it on him anyway, but I stopped myself before I took the plunge. I couldn’t throw him under the bus in front of his own little sister, and the truth of the matter was that he’d never said anything of the sort to me.

“If Hikari’s *like* your little sister, does that mean I *am* your little sister?” Yuuta interjected.

“If you’re gonna bust into the conversation without warning, could you at least do it to say something that actually makes sense?” Or so I said, but internally I was super grateful for Yuuta’s conversation-derailing interjection. It was totally incomprehensible, as always, but still. Yuuta, meanwhile, got that incredibly proud, smug look on her face and puffed out her unimpressive chest.

“You can feel free to think of me as your little sister *and* dote on me like an adorable pet kitty, Kunugi-san!”

“Sorry, I’m a dog person.”

“Like an adorable pet puppy!”

“Tell you what, bring me a frisbee, and I’ll throw it for you.” Offering to play fetch with a girl was probably *some* sort of emotional abuse—sexual harassment? Power harassment? Maybe domestic violence, if they’re a relative? Doesn’t matter.

I heard somebody snickering at our little farce of a conversation, and it goes without saying that the snickers were coming from Ayase. “You really *are* good friends, huh?”

“He’s my second friend ever, after all!” *Meaning both exactly what she said, and also that I’m the guy who plays second fiddle on her friendship priority list.*

“We’re senpai and kouhai,” I clarified, “absolutely nothing more or less.”

“You almost sound like some sort of big, tough guy!” Ayase chuckled.

“We’re comparing me to a pipsqueak, here. I’d come out looking big and tough no matter *what* I said.” We kept joking around like that for quite a while,

and I kept watching Ayase like a hawk the whole time. I was doing everything I possibly could to draw a clear senpai/kouhai line in the sand.

From an ethical standpoint, unilaterally stealing away her memories was probably an inexcusable thing to do. I had plenty of internal justifications for my actions, but they weren't enough to prevent me from feeling guilty about it. That's exactly why I felt like I had to take action here—I had to rebuild my relationship with her in an entirely different shape.

This time, I wouldn't be the target of her affection—I'd be her sorta quirky senpai who also happened to be her brother's friend. That would be the ideal form for our relationship to take. She had nothing to gain from developing feelings for me, and I didn't want to ever bring disaster down upon anyone else ever again...

—Koh.

“...Huh?”

For just a moment, it felt like something was squeezing my heart so hard it might burst. I'd felt like I'd heard something—a noise that was nostalgic, that was touching, that reverberated deep within me, tormenting me in perpetuity. I *couldn't* have heard it, but I did.

“What's wrong, Kou-san? Are you still listening?”

That time, it was just Ayase's voice. Totally normal, nothing weird about it. Disregarding the fact that she'd casually switched from “-senpai” to “-san,” I mean. Still, though, I couldn't shake it. *Why?*

Why did I keep seeing *her*, that white-haired girl I once knew, in Ayase...?

Because she was my best friend's sister? Or because I'd stolen her memories specifically to ensure that she didn't end up like *her*? I couldn't tell. The two of them weren't at all similar; they were completely different people in terms of

both looks and presence.

But somehow, it just kept happening. Ever since the very first time I met Ayase, seeing her somehow brought *her* to mind, intensely enough to cause me to irreparably damage a poor, innocent toilet seat.

This time was different, though. It wasn't like that sudden, trauma-induced onslaught of nausea. This time I *felt* her presence, clearly and intensely.

"Rei?"

I said her name before I could stop myself. I was incredibly shaken, but I couldn't take my eyes off her. Ayase didn't say anything at all in response—actually, it might be more accurate to say that she was too dumbfounded to say anything. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. I couldn't tell if she'd frozen up because I'd started spouting incomprehensible nonsense out of nowhere and she didn't get it, or if she'd frozen up because she *did* get it, at least on some level.

What I did know was that in that split second, I was absolutely terrified. It was impossible. It *had* to be impossible, but *what if?* What if, somehow, she knew something about Rei? What would I do if she did?

My throat was bone-dry, and it felt like my limbs were asleep. I dimly speculated that this must be what defendants in court feel like while awaiting the judge's verdict. It felt like the next word she spoke, whatever it might be, would change everything from that moment forward...

"'Ray'? Do they even cover light physics in second-year science?"

And Yuuta jumped into the conversation out of absolutely nowhere.

"Huh?"

"Are you so hungry you've totally lost focus? Geez, Kunugi-san, you're the little glutton that couldn't!" Confused, I glanced at the clock and found that it was just a little past noon—in other words, lunchtime. I'd muttered the name under my breath so quietly that Yuuta had apparently thought I was gibbering deliriously about my studies.

"Nah, I was just talking to myself," I retorted. "I'm not *that* hungry or

anything, and don't call people by titles that make them sound like bootleg children's books!" She'd inadvertently thrown me a life preserver, and I grabbed on to it without a second's hesitation. I knew that the odds of Ayase answering with anything other than confusion were somewhere in the region of one in a hundred billion, but I fled from her answer anyway because I'm a goddamn coward.

When she did finally speak, after a moment's hesitation, it was about a totally different topic. "Yeah, I guess it is just about lunchtime. I'll ask my brother about his plans." She stood up and walked over towards Kaito. I, meanwhile, heaved a heavy sigh of relief and gave my savior Yuuta an extremely grateful pat on the head.

"Whahuh?! What're you doing?!"

"Doting on you like a puppy. Puppies like it when you pet them, right?"

"I-I definitely don't like this, nope, no way..." I mean, when it comes down to it, little kids and dogs aren't that different in terms of how you praise them for doing a good job. She's probably just too bashful to admit she's happy about it.

Patting her head was helping me scratch and crawl my way back to some semblance of peace of mind, and it wasn't long before she stopped grumbling and actually started leaning closer to me to make it easier to reach. It was amazing how she could pack that much pet-like cuteness into such an insignificant movement.

In the end, though, nothing had actually been resolved. I still had no idea why I perceived some element of Rei in Ayase Hikari—an element that I'd never felt from anyone else before. Even far from the war and bloodshed, even in a totally different world, even having immersed myself in peace and given my heart all the respite I could offer it, I still couldn't face Rei—no, I couldn't face *anything* that had happened back then. I didn't have the guts. All I could do was keep running and lying to myself, again and again.

Everything Goes Back to Normal... Not

The looming pressure of exams made every moment we could spend studying precious, so we ended up ordering out for lunch. I was a little disappointed to miss a chance to eat Ayase's (purportedly) delicious and Kotou's (verifiably) scrumptious cooking, but that being said, it was entirely better to altogether avoid getting Renge the Cheftastrophe involved. So with all things considered, I was completely fine with things turning out that way.

By the way, for the sake of Renge's dignity I feel like I should note that she's supposedly *legitimately* good at brewing tea. She also handled the actual ordering out part, and as the eldest person present, she even covered the bill in an impressive show of generosity. Her cheftastrophic nature wasn't supernaturally potent enough to corrupt food made by other people on her behalf, thankfully, and the hors d'oeuvres that showed up at the Ayase household were actually really tasty.

With that brief and pleasant interlude out of the way, our study party resumed in all its dull, never-ending glory. When all was said and done, pretty much everyone present was diligent in their own special sort of way. You'd expect *someone* to drop out of study mode in favor of playing cards or a video game, but nope, everyone just kept working with the utmost efficiency. Even *Yuuta* was quietly focused on her workbook. I don't even know what to say about that one.

There were, of course, two exceptions.

"Kunugicchi, I'm boooored!"

"I *know*, right?"

That one innocent little moment of grumbling between Kotou and me resulted in Kiryu and Renge (who were otherwise unoccupied) deciding to tutor the both of us one-on-one. It seemed like overkill, honestly—we were just studying for finals; it wasn't *that* big of a deal—but thanks to their focused

attention, I ended up being able to really focus and not get sidetracked by any intrusive thoughts. Probably a good thing overall, honestly.

“It’s getting kinda late. Think we should call it here for today?” suggested Kaito, finally.

“Woohoo! I’ve been waiting for someone to say that!” I exclaimed, immediately sprawling out on the floor. The world outside was already stained red by the vivid glow of sunset. I’m pretty positive that was the longest extended study session I’d been subjected to over the course of my entire life.

Kotou and Kazuki, both of whose stamina levels when it came to all that stuff were just as low as mine, collapsed right along with me. “Man, I just did a lifetime’s worth of studying in a single day!” moaned Kotou, while Kazuki was already pretending to snore. We really had hit the books from the early morning all the way to sunset. The atmosphere of academic rigor had been even thicker than it was during a typical school day.

“You need to review at home as well, okay?” cautioned Kiryu. “Cramming everything in today was all well and good, but it’s important to make sure that you actually remember it all a week from now.”

“Okaaay! Thanks so much, Kyou-chan!” cried Kotou. I was grateful too—Kiryu might’ve been an intense and unrelenting teacher, but saying stuff like that made it clear that she really cared about us. She looked like an incredibly nice person, all of a sudden. I guess she *had* to be a nice person to sacrifice that much of her personal time to tutor us, really.

I turned to Renge. “Thanks for today, Miss President.”

“You’re quite welcome, Kunugi-kun. It was no trouble at all, really—you had a solid foundation and picked up on everything I taught you quite quickly.” Considering the fact that she was the one who’d tutored me up to a high-school level in the first place, that line came across as a bit self-congratulatory.

“You’ve really got it together, huh, Miss President? You barely did any of your own studying at all today,” commented Kazuki.

“I wouldn’t say that at all. It’s important for me to have a solid understanding

of the first-and second-year material, so this made for a very productive opportunity to review,” replied Renge with a smile I couldn’t see as particularly sincere. I didn’t think she was *lying*, per se, but it was pretty obvious that she was giving that fact more weight than it actually bore. “Not to mention that this is a rare opportunity to interact with my underclassmen.”

“You’re making yourself sound like a real model senpai, huh?” I jabbed.

“Oh, no need to be bashful,” she countered. “It’s perfectly acceptable to admit how much you idolize me.” She beamed, and I sighed. I knew that no matter what I said in response to that, it wouldn’t register as meaningful in her mind. She was in her student-council-president mode, after all, so I’d be commenting on her persona rather than on Renge herself.

An exchange between Kunugi Kou, second-year student at Oumei High, and Myourenji Renge, president of the student council, could never get our real feelings across. It’d inevitably turn out to be an act, and a more or less meaningless one. There wasn’t much of a need to go through that whole process at the moment, so I didn’t feel like forcing a conversation.

Renge, however, had other ideas. “Come on, Kunugi-kun, don’t you have anything to say to the kind, devoted senpai who spent her whole day helping you?” I had no clue why she wasn’t letting the conversation peter off—she was actually dragging me back into it, even. She was an absolute enigma, and I’d never get a decent handle on her personality.

“What’s going on with—”

“Hey, Renge-san, Kou!” I was about to ask if something had happened to her, but Kaito picked the perfect moment to come over and chat us up. “Oh, sorry, am I interrupting something?”

“No, not at all. What is it?” replied Renge.

“We were just talking about what we’re gonna do next, and Tsumugi said that we should all have dinner together. Do you wanna go?”

“Hmm, I suppose—”

“Sorry, but I’ll have to pass,” I interjected, cutting off Renge. In spite of the fact that Kaito went out of his way to invite me, I turned him down pretty

bluntly, shoved my papers into my bag, and stood up.

“Busy with something?”

“Heading home to sleep. Human brains process and organize information best when they’re unconscious, y’know? Gotta get some shut-eye to make sure everything I crammed in there today sticks!”

“But really, you’re just lazy and wanna take a nap, right?”

“That too.” I had to admit it. Kaito knew me way too well.

I was still curious about what Renge’s deal was, but I could spend all day guessing and still never actually figure her out. Some famous philosopher apparently once said, “Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed.” I have no clue what he meant by that, but if I had to read a single piece of nuance into it, it’d be something along the lines of, “Man, people sure do *think* a lot, don’t they?”

Just thinking and thinking away at something doesn’t necessarily gain you anything, though. Thinking tires you out, and sometimes all it takes to find the right answer is to *not* think about it for a while. You know how sometimes you’ll search for something for ages, only to finally find it the instant you give up and stop looking? It’s just like that.

“Kou?” I’d been so focused on overthinking my excuse for not overthinking stuff that I’d fallen silent, much to Kaito’s confusion. *What an incredibly pointless thing to be preoccupied by.*

“Ah, sorry, spaced out for a sec. Guess I really am sleepy.” I turned to face the others. “Nice work today, everyone, and thanks again! Sorry I can’t come along—have fun without me!”

A few of them seemed surprised that I was heading home already, but I knew that if I gave them the chance to question me, I might be there all evening, so I hustled out of the Ayase household before they had the chance.



I strolled home, indulging in one of those listless moods that lets you really appreciate the beauty of a nice sunset. I had the sudden urge to take a picture

—it felt like one of those perfect opportunities to get a great shot to post online and earn some internet points with. Of course, I didn't actually bother.

“Huh?”

I happened to put my hand in my pocket and realized that something was conspicuously missing: my phone. We'd all exchanged contact information at one point during the study party, and I figured I must've set it down and forgotten about it back then.

“Well, whatever,” I muttered. Not having my phone wasn't a big deal. All I was planning on doing was going home to sleep, and Kaito would probably bring it to school with him on Monday. But no sooner had I thought that than somebody shouted behind me.

“*Kou-saaan!*”

“Wha?” I turned around to find the *last* person I would've guessed running in my direction. Her brown hair bounced gently with each step, and the brilliant light of the setting sun made it glimmer with an almost whitish hue.



Ayase Hikari ran up to me, gasping and panting. “Sorry to stop you! It’s just, you forgot your phone, so...”

“R-Right, sorry about that. Thanks for bringing it, but, well, *why you?*” I accepted the phone gratefully, but I couldn’t help but question the situation while I was at it. The sun might’ve been setting, but the day’s sweltering heat was still a long ways away from clearing up, and she was dripping with sweat. Surely we didn’t know each other well enough for her to go that far out of her way for me without a good reason?

“I would’ve felt bad about asking a guest to run it out to you,” she replied.

“Okay, but you could’ve just given it to me on Monday.”

“We don’t know that for sure!” She looked a little unhappy, possibly because she felt like her hard work hadn’t been appreciated the way she’d hoped it would be. Her mannerisms really did remind me of *hers*, and I felt a twinge of pain in my chest. “And besides, I wanted to talk to you anyway. You’re my brother’s best friend, and it looks like Yuu-chan really looks up to you too! It feels like I’m the only one who’s being left out.”

“I really don’t think that’s true.”

“It *is!*” Her expression changed at the drop of a hat as she broke out in a big, bright smile. Her amiable nature was on full display, just like it had been the last time I got to know her. I guess that just made sense, though. Taking away a part of somebody’s memories wouldn’t change their entire personality. “Would you mind if I walk you back to your home, Kou-san?”

“You really think I *wouldn’t* mind? I live alone, for your information.”

“Oh! Okay then, yeah, it might still be a little soon for that.” Ayase blushed faintly and let out a little laugh, like she was trying to gloss over the matter. Or maybe it was more of a bashful sort of laugh? Hard to say.

“Anyway,” I said, “I’ll treat you to something to drink, at least.”

“Wait, really?”

“Wouldn’t be very gentlemanly to let a girl run herself into a sweaty mess for me only to send her off with a ‘kthxbye,’ would it?”

“Okay, then, I’ll take you up on that!”

Then she more or less dragged me into a nearby café she was familiar with. I’d actually meant that I’d get her something from a nearby vending machine, but it was really hard to bring that up after she got the café idea in her head.

The place was mostly empty, and the interior was full of classy, antique-looking furniture that gave it a sort of “secret store that only the locals know” feel. The worker at the counter recommended the iced café au lait, so we ordered a pair of those and took a seat at a nearby table.

Hikari immediately struck up a conversation. “So, did your studying go well?”

“Yeah, thanks to everyone’s help.”

“I’m surprised you came, honestly. I’ve heard you’ve been missing a lot of classes lately too.”

“Don’t give me that look. I know what you’re thinking, and no, we’re not in the same boat.” I let out a strained chuckle. “That look” was one that told me she was sympathizing with me. Oh, and the “too” at the end really grabbed my attention. I was seriously curious about how Ayase had rationalized her own truancy and decided to dig a bit deeper. “Hey, Ayase—why’d you take a week off school?”

“Huh? Why’re you asking?”

“Well, I mean...I’m just curious, honestly. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to talk about it, exactly. It’s more like I don’t know how to explain it, myself.” She stared at her drink and stirred it with her straw as she spoke. The topic seemed to have her at a bit of a loss. “I was too afraid to go to school—to go outside at all, even. The fear got less and less intense as time went by, but...I don’t actually know why it got better or why I was afraid to go outside in the first place.”

“You don’t know, huh?” Everything made sense so far—after all, the cause of her fear had been erased from her memory. It wasn’t strange at all for her to notice its absence. I nodded, satisfied with her explanation, but she just stared at me. “What?”

“Nothing, really... I just noticed that you have long eyelashes.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” It was abrupt, to say the least. Who pays attention to some random dude’s eyelashes?

“Well, anyway,” she continued, ignoring my question, “the point is that I don’t know why I skipped school either. That’s all! Story’s over!”

“Wasn’t much of a story to begin with...”

“Well, I’ve had to explain the whole thing over and over again! I’m sure you can appreciate how sick of it I am by now.”

“Over and over? I only asked... Oh, okay, I get it. You didn’t mean *me*.” I’d only asked the one time, but I could only imagine how many people had questioned her about it throughout the two days she’d been back. It wouldn’t just be her homeroom teacher and her friends—she’d probably also been mobbed by self-proclaimed “nice guys” who were using it as an excuse to talk to her.

“You’re really considerate, aren’t you, Kou-san?” she mused. “I think that’s wonderful.”

I hesitated for a moment. “You’re really reading me wrong here.” I was starting to get worried. It sort of felt like our pointless little question-and-answer session was earning me points in her eyes every step of the way.

Maybe I was just being oversensitive, though? The whole thing could’ve been totally normal in her eyes—like, maybe she was just trying to tease me. But, I mean, “*wonderful*”? What’s that supposed to mean? I wasn’t even close to brave enough to ask, of course. *Can’t exactly call myself a Hero anymore if I can’t even work up the guts for that, eh?*

“All right, I’ve answered one of your questions,” she continued. “Now it’s your turn to answer one of mine.”

“Wait, since when was that a rule? First I’ve heard of it.”

“If you want information from someone, you have to give them your own info in exchange! It’s a given.” *What is she, a black market information broker? She might be a high school girl, but stylish cafés like this don’t suit her vibe at all.*

“All right, fine, can’t argue with ‘a given.’ As long as it’s something I *can*

answer, I will.”

“How many people have you dated up until now?”

“...That came from so far out of left field, I’m genuinely speechless.”

“You are *not*. You’re talking right now, aren’t you?”

“That was a quick and easy summary of the situation; doesn’t count.” I really, *really* hadn’t seen that question coming. I hadn’t had any clue what sort of question she *would* ask, to be fair, but still. “What’re you after?”

“Is that your next question? If I answer that, I get to ask you another one, you know?”

“The ‘givens’ in this world are pretty harsh, huh?”

“Incidentally, I also answered your question about the rule earlier, so I still have one extra question in the bank.”

“Not fair!”

“You have to answer my first question before anything else, though!” *What is this, an interrogation?!* I almost said that out loud, but I swallowed the words at the last second. I wouldn’t put it past her to answer it like an actual question and add another point on to her side of the board.

“How many people have I dated, huh...? Man, I dunno if I can even count that high!”

“By the way, if you lie, you have to swallow a thousand needles. Just so you know.”

“Your mind goes to some pretty brutal places for someone who looks so innocent.”

“Kids say that all the time; I’m not the one who came up with it. So? Go on, how many?”

“Zero, okay?! Zero!” I decided that dragging it out any longer wouldn’t gain me anything and answered bluntly and honestly. It wasn’t the most pleasant truth to have exposed, but I’d rather get outed as a virgin than have to swallow a thousand needles. Admitting it wasn’t gonna kill me, but sticking to my guns

and getting a throat full of sewing supplies very well might.

“Oh, is that so?”

“Not much of a reaction, huh?”

“I only asked in the first place because I thought I might be able to get some relationship advice from you. You’re my senpai, after all.”

“Wait a minute, don’t go answering things that aren’t even questions! That was a statement—it didn’t count!”

“Oh, forget the question and answer thing. It’s getting in the way of us having a decent conversation.” *Making up a rule then overruling it herself a moment later, huh? Somebody’s a free spirit.* She’d once again caught my attention, though. Asking me for love advice? What? “You’re my brother’s best friend, so I thought I could come to you, but never mind, I guess...”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘never mind’? Why not just ask?”

“You literally just told me that you have no experience, didn’t you?” She shot a pointed look at me, but that wasn’t enough to make me back down. I mean, come on—Ayase was in love; of course I had to dig! Considering that I’d erased her memories, there was absolutely no chance that *I’d* be the target of her affections. That meant that this was my big chance to put her life back on track and undo the damage that the perverted old man and I had done! “You seem weirdly excited about this,” she added questioningly.

“There isn’t a high schooler out there who doesn’t like a little gossip every once in a while,” I countered.

“High school *girls*, maybe.”

“People do tell me that I’m really in touch with my feminine side.” *No they don’t. The question for a question rule’s off the table, so I can lie without fear of needle-swallowing, right?*

“Look, Ayase. Your brother’s a total chick magnet, and I’m his best friend, y’know? You saw what today was like—he’s practically drowning in girls, and he wouldn’t be living that sorta high school life if it weren’t for my support. Yeah, sure, I don’t *personally* have any dating experience, but that has nothing to do

with being a good wingman! A genius pitcher who can throw a 160 kilometer per hour fastball needs a catcher who's up to snuff to take the lead, and every famous goal that's been scored only happened because of the efforts of whoever set it up!"

"So you're saying you're both a wingman *and* a shot-caller?"

"And I'm damn good at it too."

Ayase paused, seemingly in thought, then nodded and smiled. "Are you, now? In that case, maybe I'll ask for your advice after all."

"Scratch the 'maybe.' Please take me up on this—you won't regret it." It was sort of weird for me—the person being asked for help—to say "please" like that, but it was a genuine request on my part. I *wanted* it to happen.

I had erased Ayase Hikari's memories. I had plenty of reasons for doing it, mostly revolving around not dragging her into the cycle of misfortune I stand at the epicenter of. I don't regret it, but that doesn't change the fact that one-sidedly stealing that aspect of her future away from her was an utterly despicable thing to do.

As of that moment, though, she was starting to move forward again, with somebody other than me as her prospective partner, and I was happy to hear it. I was really, genuinely happy.

I couldn't deny it—I was projecting Rei, the girl who had lost her life thanks to my meddling, onto Ayase. Maybe it was because she was my best friend's sister, or maybe it was because my experience with Rei was what had driven me to help Ayase with her problems in the first place.

But in any case, I thought that maybe being Hikari's wingman and helping her find a future for herself would finally let me pay back at least a little of what I'd owed Rei for so very, very long. It could be my tribute to her memory, not as a fated Hero who'd save the world, not as the protagonist, but as, well...

"Anyway, consider yourself in good hands! I'm a best friend sidekick; I've got you covered!"

"What on earth is *that* supposed to mean?"

I guess that *was* a weird thing to say. Hikari smiled in a “what am I supposed to say to that?” sort of way. Still, though, I couldn’t stop myself from breaking into a grin as well, unable to disguise how delighted I was.

Long ago, someone told me that it’s impossible to have too much hope. All your tiny little wishes—to eat something tasty, to read the next issue of your favorite manga, to have a nice dream at night... They all come together to form something more than just basic desires. They form your hope, and they’re what let you live a life that’s full of purpose.

In that moment, I felt like I’d finally gotten my hands on that very sense of hope. It was the hope that I wouldn’t just lead Kaito to a wonderful happy ending. I’d make it happen for his sister Hikari as well.

“All right, Ayase Hikari-san, let’s hear it. Who’s this person you have your eye on?”

“That’s a secret, at least for now. I’m sure you’ll be shocked when you find out, though, Kou-san!”

“Guess I’ll look forward to that.”

I’d watch over her, and I’d see her love be fulfilled with my own two eyes. Then and only then would I finally be able to take the first step down my own path and move on with the rest of my life, just like her. I was sure of it.

Epilogue

“All right, that should do it...or close enough, anyway,” I mumbled to no one in particular since I was all alone in my room. I was oddly amused by the sound of my own voice, but, I mean, pretty much *anything* can feel amusing when you’ve just finished studying for an exam.

I hadn’t prepared enough to give my efforts the big ol’ “that should do it for real” stamp of approval, but taking into account my own academic ability, my level of motivation, my place in society, and a bunch of other factors, it seemed like as good a place to wrap up as any. At least, that’s what I told myself as I stared blankly at the notebook on my desk.

I mean, studying with a bunch of honor students was all well and good, but when all’s said and done, how you do on a test is at least seventy or eighty percent determined by whether you know the basics and what sort of attitude you went into your actual classes with.

Getting super fired up ’cause you can’t go to your summer training camp if you fail’s pretty standard in manga and stuff, but I wasn’t in a club and didn’t actually have a camp to go to. Besides, if a certain high and mighty homeroom teacher who lived only to bully her students was to be believed, I was already locked in for summer school. It was too late for me to put in the effort anyway, so why bother?

“Uuugh, I’m friggin’ tired.” I tossed my mechanical pencil onto my desk and dove into bed. By “bed,” I mean “my futon,” of course. It wasn’t the bounciest of landings, but it was still nice, soft, and satisfying. A massive wave of drowsiness swept over me the second I touched down, but midway through a yawn, my phone started vibrating. I had a text.

Kiryu: Have you reviewed what you learned today? Knowing the material is important, but putting it into practice is just as vital.

No emojis, actually ending the sentence with a period, cutting straight to the point in the simplest way possible—yeah, this is pretty much how I figured she

would text. She couldn't hold a candle to me when it came to brevity, though.

Kou: sure did

If I were in public I would have to act hyped about getting a text from a girl to the point of literally dancing a jig, but since I was by my lonesome, I could tap out a two-word reply at a rate of approximately one word per minute and send it off.

When I really think about it, Kiryu might've changed more than anyone over the past several days. Or rather, more accurately, it's my relationship with her that's changed. Saying that we get along now would be both an oversimplification and maybe a little premature, but considering how we used to be around each other, it's undeniable that we're doing a lot better these days. She *never* would've sent a fussy, nosy text like this before, that's for sure.

But yeah, on second thought, she hasn't *really* changed at all. Big events that change people's personalities on a fundamental level don't just come about every day, and I sure can't remember anything of the sort happening to her lately. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say that this caring, attentive side of her was cultivated by her relationship with her little brother. And, like, she's kinda cold and snappy with Kotou every once in a while, but she's never been *cruel*.

In short: people don't change that easily, and I'm no exception. I came to this world with magical powers that aren't supposed to exist, and even now that I'm here, I'm still totally capable of using them. Erasing memories is the one trick I can manage, of course, but it's still one thing that makes me truly different from the people around me, and it's an ability I've made use of, for better or for worse.

People don't change that easily. However much I'd hoped and wished to change myself, in the end, I was still doing all the same things I'd done up until that point. My true inner nature might not've changed in the slightest since the time I lived in that other world.

"Huh...? She replied *already*? And ugh, talk about long-winded..." Kiryu's next text was long enough it didn't even fit on a single screen. Just looking at it was

enough to induce a powerful sense of fatigue.

TL;DR: “‘Did’ in past tense, meaning that you’ve already finished reviewing, meaning that you didn’t study for anywhere close to long enough, you pathetic, pig-like man-child?” That was the gist of it, anyway. I didn’t actually read the whole thing, so there very well might’ve been more to it than that.

“Man, how am I supposed to reply to *that*?” The little princess was clearly pissed—I could tell from the way she was typing alone. A half-baked reply would probably prompt an even more intense counter-reply.

“Hmm...”

I crossed my arms, sat cross-legged upon my futon, and racked my brain for a solution. Needless to say, all thoughts of studying more had flown completely out the window.



“Mmm...”

He just wasn’t replying. A sigh tried to slither its way out from my lips, but I swallowed it back and let out a groan instead, staring at my phone as I waited for a notification that just wouldn’t come.

“Maybe my message was a little too long? But what else was I supposed to say...?” I felt unusually timid as I toweled off my hair. Long or not, that message had been necessary—I wrote it that way because it *had* to be that way.

And besides, *he* was in the wrong in the first place! He was moaning and groaning all throughout our study session about how his summer lessons were already set in stone, so studying was pointless, but for all he knew, getting good enough grades on his finals could very well overturn that decision. He just wouldn’t take things seriously, no matter what I said.

“Should I send another text to check if he actually read the first one...? Oh, or I could give him a call...? That might come across as too pushy...”

I spent a while longer glaring fruitlessly at my phone, wasting precious time that I could have used to further my own studies. I was so preoccupied that I’d jumped in and out of the bath after a mere five minutes when I’d usually soak

for somewhere in the vicinity of a half hour.

“Kotou-san always replies to my texts right away, so why won’t he...? D-Don’t tell me I’ve made him hate me?! N-No, that’s far too negative. Keep yourself together, Kiryu Kyouka!” I tried to talk myself out of it, but unfortunately, once the idea had sprung to mind, it proved difficult to let go of.

I was never the most sociable person to begin with. Ever since I was little, I’ve had to deal with boys constantly clamoring for my attention and girls teasing me relentlessly. I quickly came to the conclusion that people were *scary*. I only had a few real relationships—with my mother, my father, my little brother, and the boy my brother was so attached to, Kou-kun. Actually, it might be better to say that he *depended* on Kou-kun.

Eventually, my parents—my father, in particular—decided that they had to do something to remedy my introversion. They made me take Aikido lessons to help me become stronger and had me attend a particularly strict cram school. It goes without saying that neither of those activities were well-suited for me in the slightest, but I knew that they would be upset if I said I didn’t want to go, and that conflict drove a rift between us.

Then on top of it, Kou-kun—the boy I now realize was my first love, albeit a childish and immature one—disappeared from my life without even the slightest of warnings. Then my brother, Daiki, the person dearer to me than anyone else, passed away... I had nobody left to support me.

Losing Daiki was so intense of a shock, I wasn’t sure at the time if I had any reason to live on myself. My parents were hit just as hard, of course, and his passing helped shorten the distance between us to an extent, but admitting that fact felt like acknowledging his death, and I couldn’t stand it...

In the end, I was never able to mature past it. I threw myself into my studies as a means of rebelling, of running away from everything I couldn’t face up to. I’d do anything as long as it meant that I could forget all the awful things in life and gain even the slightest degree of self-affirmation.

But heartlessness is an inherent aspect of human nature. Over the course of

time, both my parents and I began to recover from the state that Daiki's death put us into. We never forgot him, but we learned to accept reality. When an opportunity arose for my father to transfer to a new workplace, we bade farewell to Shusen City, the town I'd lived in for all my life. One might claim that moving was just another means of running away from it all for us.

I'd kept practicing Aikido out of sheer inertia up until that point, but I finally stopped after we moved. I could say the opposite of my studies, though. I threw myself into them with more focus than ever. It was something like a routine for me—a daily ritual that helped me keep myself together.

“I really haven't changed, huh... Not even after all this time...”

I lay down on my bed and hugged a stuffed animal that'd been my favorite since I was a child. That was another routine of mine...well, more of a habit, really. It'd be humiliating if anyone saw me do this, but that's part of why it made me feel like I was well and truly alone, which helped calm me down.

“Hah, I *wish* it did that. I'm not calm in the slightest.”

However hard I tried to make myself relax, it just wasn't happening this time. All my attention was focused on my phone, and by extension, on Kunugi-kun. If the nickname granted to me by my classmates really rang true, I wouldn't be swayed by emotions like this. I'd be a cool, aloof ice queen. But the truth was, that was all just a persona that I worked frantically to put on in public.

At my core, I was still the same person I'd been in my childhood: a weak, timid girl without an ounce of self-confidence who always needed someone else to rely on.

People don't change that easily. I can change my image like I'd change an outfit, but in the end, the person underneath that new outfit will still be the same me as ever.

“Maybe I should call him or send a follow-up text after all... Argh, maybe if I hadn't spent all that time studying to ignore my problems, I'd know how to deal with things like this...”

If this problem were taken from a textbook I'd have the correct answer ready in the blink of an eye, but of course it couldn't be that easy. I've been doing my best to avoid socializing for what feels like forever, and "my best" was so effective that it earned me the "ice queen" title. Knowing what to do in a situation like this was simply beyond me.

"This is all Kunugi-kun's fault, anyway! He could at least say *something*, couldn't he?! I don't even care if it's a good reply or a bad one!"

I knew that lying there and mumbling complaints that nobody would ever hear wasn't going to resolve anything, but I kept reflexively glancing at my phone regardless. The situation was getting more and more irritating with every passing minute.

Before I knew it, Kunugi-kun and his stupid, obnoxious grin materialized in my mind's eye. It made me vividly recall everything that had happened between our reunion at Oumei High's entrance ceremony and now. It made me think about how he always acted like an absolutely clueless dullard, except for the rare moments where his eyes would light up with a sudden intensity or the even rarer moments where he'd allow me a peek at his vulnerable side...

"Aaargh, what is *wrong* with me?!"

My mind was dominated by a feeling I hadn't experienced in quite a long time. I didn't have a name to put to that feeling, though. I'd forgotten it for so long—it felt fresh, like an incomprehensible mixture of happiness and frustration, of irritation and impatience.

I knew that if I let myself indulge in that feeling I might never break out of it, so I mustered up the force of will to grab my phone and open up my contacts list. I barely had any names registered at all, so it only took me an instant to scroll through it, pick out the person I was looking for and tap on her number. She picked up a moment later.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Kotou-san? I have a question for you, if you have a moment."

In the end, I couldn't bring myself to call Kunugi-kun directly—at least, not in that particular moment—so I contacted Kotou-san instead.

“A question? A-As long as it’s not about studying, I’ll answer anything!”

“Why do you sound so worked up...? Never mind, it’s fine. So, well, I wanted your opinion on something... Umm, this is something a friend of mine was asking me about earlier.”

“Asking for a friend, huh? Aaah, I see, I see...”

“What?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it! Go on, ask away!”

I hesitated for just a moment. “All right. So, you see, my friend said...”



Meanwhile...

“So yeah, that’s about the size of it. How would you reply if somebody sent you a friggin’ essay like that, Kaito?! Just a reminder, by the way, this is all about a friend of mine.”

“Right, a ‘friend’ of yours and the beautiful, coolheaded genius girl who tutored him. We’re talking about you and Kyouka, huh?”

“N-No, we’re not! We’re talking about my friend and a friend of my friend! Man, why would you think this was about me and Kiryu?! How crazy is that?! Ha ha ha *ha!*”

Kaito let out a long, exasperated sigh. He was just about to review everything he’d learned at the study party held at his house earlier in the day, but then his best friend called him up to ask for advice in the stupidest way possible.

“Let me double-check something. Kou, that coolheaded beauty went way out of her way to tutor you...your *friend*, and now she’s mad at *him* because *he* hasn’t been reviewing the lesson like she wanted *him* to. Right?”

“I-I dunno if she’s *mad*, exactly. It’s a little more distant than that? Like, think ‘detective cornering a criminal at the top of a cliff’—that sorta feeling.”

“That’s not any better.”

“But I *did* actually study, okay?! It just *happened* that she texted me right around the time I was wrapping up for the night! If I apologize, it’ll make it look

like I didn't do any studying at all!"

"'I'?"

"...Is what I would say if I were my friend, who I'm not. Did you say something? Train was passing by, couldn't hear a thing for a minute there."

"That train showed up and passed by awfully quickly."

"F-Forget about the train, okay?! Just help me out here! How would *you* fix this?"

Kaito sighed again. He couldn't tell if Kou was even trying to tell a decent lie or not. It would be all too easy to tell him, "Don't know, don't care, figure it out on your own," and he'd been tempted to do so at many times over the course of the conversation, but in the end, he just wasn't heartless enough to refuse a request from his best friend.

"I think the big question here, Kou, is how your 'friend' actually wants to resolve this. Like, what specifically do you mean by 'fixing' it?"

"Hell if I know!" He'd completely given up on thinking it through himself. Kaito sighed for the umpteenth time that evening, but Kou didn't seem even slightly inclined to back down.

Kou was always running off on his own initiative, leading Kaito and his other friends around by the nose, but whenever they ended up interacting one-on-one like this, it felt like he lost even more of his capacity for common sense than usual.

If you wanted to make it sound good, you could say that it meant Kou felt comfortable acting like himself around Kaito, but that didn't change the fact that it was exhausting to put up with sometimes. That evening was most definitely one of those times, and it was even worse than usual, as if he was making up for the relatively subdued period he'd been through recently.

"Anyway, c'mon, just help me out here, Kaito-mon!"

"Not happening, Kunuta-kun."

"Kunuta... Kunukunuta... Is it just me, or does that sound like the sorta name a tanuki might have?"

“I have no clue what you’re talking about, and are you just gonna ignore the ‘not happening’ part?” Kaito had finally let his actual feelings about the matter slip out, and he decided that with that cat out of the bag, he might as well follow through with it. His tone had progressed past the point of exasperation and had taken on a certain serious edge, which made Kou gulp loudly enough for Kaito to hear it through the phone.

“All right, Kou, here’s what you should tell your friend: If he can think up the perfect solution to his problem or come up with a clever excuse to get him out of it on his own, then fine, go for it. But if he *can’t*, then he should just be honest about it and admit that he was in the wrong. Even if he really did study, like you said, he still barely kept at it for any time at all before he gave up, right?”

“W-Well, I mean, yeah, but—”

“Then of course she’d be mad! Even Kyouka would get pissed off about that. She was pretty much keeping constant watch over you for the second half of our study party. Imagine putting off your own work to help somebody study, only for them to forget all of it by the next morning... I don’t even wanna *think* about what she’d do.”

“Eek! S-Stop trying to scare me...”

“I’m not trying to scare you. I’m just describing what I imagine is most likely to happen.” Apparently, Kou’s imagination was producing a pretty vivid image of the scene. He’d totally forgotten about the pretense that the story was about his friend. “Get it? Just be honest, okay? Whether or not she gets mad at you for it is totally up to her. All you can do at this point is...I dunno, pray, I guess?”

“You’re heartless!”

“Yeah, good luck with that.” Kaito ignored his best friend’s anguished wail and hung up his phone. He waited for a moment, but since Kou didn’t immediately call back, Kaito assumed that he’d been convinced to get a grip, so he put his phone down on his desk.

Whether or not Kou would actually put that advice into action, of course, was anyone’s guess. There was a chance he’d take Kaito’s advice to heart and be honest, but there was an even larger chance that he’d lose his nerve right

before going through with it.

“Sheesh... C’mon, get it together, Kou. Summer break’s coming up, y’know?”

He knew there was no way his words would get through to Kou, but Kaito muttered to himself anyway as he sat down and got back to studying.

The summer of one’s second year in high school has a special significance. Being as Oumei High was a college prep school, every single one of its students was aware of that fact. The summer of their third year, after all, they’d be working themselves half to death studying for their college entrance exams.

As such, to Kaito and his friends, the upcoming summer vacation would be both the perfect chance to make some high school memories and also one of the *last* chances left to do so. Having that precious period eaten up by remedial lessons would be a tragedy that they simply couldn’t let happen... Though the fact that Kou was already scheduled to be subjected to those lessons threw a bit of a wrench into the works.

That’s why Kaito was prepared to throw himself into his studies with unusual enthusiasm...until his phone started vibrating once again.

“Dammit, Kou...wait, it’s not him?” As he picked up, his phone’s display informed him that the call was, in fact, from Kotou Tsumugi. “Hello?”

“Kaito! Help me! Actually, no, help Kyouka! I think everything’s about to get all stupid and complicated again!”

“...Huh?”

Just a little over a week remains until finals begin.

Summer is just around the corner.

Side Story 1: Forgotten or Not

This is a dream.

It was a dream I knew well—a dream that held a special significance for me—so I knew right away. My dreams are almost always incoherent. The conversations I have in them and the things that happen to me are random and illogical, but somehow, I still never realize that I'm dreaming.

But *this* recurring dream is different. It's logical, consistent, and feels just like real life. There's a sense of warmth and solitude to it as well, yet in spite of its realism, I always immediately know that it's a dream. I know that I'm dreaming whether I want to or not.

In this particular dream, I live in everlasting darkness. The world is pitch-black, cold, and desolate, without the slightest glimmer of light to be seen. That darkness is all I've even known—and yet it doesn't feel like some terrible hardship. Even if I can't see, there's always someone there with me holding my hand.

Sometimes the hand is soft, its grip gentle. That's my brother. He's been holding my hand for as long as I can remember. His grip is reassuring.

Sometimes the hand's grasp is a little stronger, more full of emotion. That's the girl who's like an older sister to me. I know exactly how she feels about my brother, but I keep everything she tells me a secret from him. It can stay between the two of us until she becomes my sister for real one day.

And sometimes...the hand is timid. Its grasp is cautious, almost fearful, like it's worried it might break me with the slightest touch. I can tell in an instant that it's *him*.

His hand is slightly rough to the touch, his grasp a little too clumsy to call gentle. I can't say whether it's full of emotion or not—it's more like he doesn't

know how to express his feelings. Still, though, his hand fills my heart with warmth and comfort more than anyone else's.

I want to be special to him someday—like my brother is to my future sister. My heart is set on him. Even I realize how strange that is: compared with everyone else in my life, I've barely spent any time with him at all, and yet somehow, I just know. My heart races when I feel his touch. Hearing his voice is all it takes to fill me with joy.

But at the same time, I'm nervous. I can't help but wonder: what does he think of me? Me, the blind girl who wouldn't be able to live without having someone else around to help her?

Does he think I'm weak? Pathetic? Or worse, unsightly?

Just the thought of him seeing me like that is painful. I thought I'd accepted that side of myself. I always knew that I was defective. I knew that I was a burden—a pointless, petty existence whose only purpose was to be protected. I'd accepted it, but for some reason, I don't want *him* to think of me that way. I know this is selfish of me, but I want to stand on even footing with him.

I don't *just* want to be protected—I want to protect *him*. I don't *just* want to be doted upon—I want to dote on *him*. I want *him* to show me the frailty he keeps hidden away from the rest of the world. I know that it's impossible, that he'd never...but I want it anyway.

Day by day, he grows more and more important to me. Day by day, the emotion building in my heart overwhelms me. It's an emotion I've never felt before, and I know it's leading me around by the nose, but still, I can't stop it. I don't *want* to stop it.

If I could see, I'd never let him out of my sight. I'd comfort him whenever he looked sad. I'd smile right alongside him whenever he smiled. I'd run right over to him whenever I caught sight of him. *I* want to hold *his* hand.

But I couldn't. I was a burden to him all the way to the very end. I made him cry. I made him suffer. I never overcame my weakness.

Please, God—if I can be reborn, then please, let me meet him again. Let me

meet the strong and reliable, yet frail and gentle boy I loved once more.



“Ah...”

I woke up. The pitch-black veil was broken, though the room I woke up in was still dark. I could dimly make out the familiar features of my own room’s ceiling above me.

“I knew it was a dream,” I mumbled to myself, a little dejected but at the same time a little relieved. It hurt to breathe, and I was so drenched in sweat it was like I’d just come inside from a downpour. The dampness on my cheeks, however, wasn’t sweat at all. The moment I realized that, my tears began to well up once more. I sobbed. I felt a crushing sensation in my chest, so much so that it was actually painful. My tears just wouldn’t stop, and I knew why. I was crying because I *didn’t* know why I was in so much pain.

It might’ve seemed crazy to other people, but to me, that dream was nothing unusual. I’d been having it for as long as I could remember, and I was very familiar with it. I’d never told anyone about it, though. Not my parents and not my brother either.

Even as a child, I understood that if I told them, they’d assume I was just being weird. As I grew up, reaching the same age as the me in my dreams and developing a concept of common sense, I realized just how right that instinctual understanding had been.

There’s another “me” inside me. I don’t have a split personality or anything like that, but in a strange way that I can’t really explain, I’ve always felt that way. Every once in a while she’ll appear in my dreams and teach me all about the joy she felt when she met *him* and the deep-seated regret she felt for the fact that her death caused him to suffer.

I always yearned for that boy I’d never seen. I’d grown up with that other me—the blind me in my dreams. It felt totally natural for the person she adored to be special to me as well.

I wanted to be worthy of *him*. Unlike back then, when all I could do was let myself be protected, the current me had the ability to see. I could walk on my

own, with my own two legs... It made me happier than I could describe, but I still wanted to be better—to be someone he would be proud of.

I taught myself how to cook because I wanted to feed him something delicious that I'd made. I always worked as hard as I could in school at both academics and athletics, and I was always the top student in my class without fail. *Seeing* made me so happy that I started drawing too...but, well, I'm not exactly good enough at that yet to brag about it, I guess.

"I heard some guy asked you out again, Hikari?"

"Not just 'some guy'—it was a senpai this time, and the star of the soccer team, right? That dude's so popular, they call him the team heartthrob!"

"I can't believe you turned him down; what a waste! You could've at least given him a chance, right?"

Around the time I got into middle school, I started getting a lot of attention from boys. I didn't know what to make of it (though I think some part of me enjoyed it). I never actually wanted to date any of them, and I felt bad for them when I turned them down, but it was still nice to know that I was attractive in their eyes.

If I could ever meet *him*, I wondered, would he fall for me? That boy I'd never seen, who probably lived in an altogether different world, who there was absolutely no guarantee I'd ever find?

Whenever I woke up from that dream, everything that happened in it would vanish from my mind, fading away like a wisp of morning mist. I couldn't even remember his name. But still, just thinking about the scattered fragments I *could* remember made a warmth spread throughout my chest.

I never doubted that I'd be able to meet him someday. It's not that I was confident I'd meet him, exactly—it's just that it never even occurred to me to doubt it. I'm not quite sure how to put it... It was like a child's unwavering belief that Santa Claus is real, I guess.

These days, though, I've been getting scared. *What if I never meet him after*

all? I don't know when I started to think that way, but that's a big part of why I always want to put all the effort I possibly can into living my own life. Maybe I'll never meet him, and maybe someday I'll fall in love with someone else, but when that time finally comes, I want to make sure that I won't have any regrets.

...I'm forgetting something. I realized the moment I woke up yesterday morning.

At first, I couldn't believe myself. Somehow, before I knew it, I'd taken almost a whole week off from school, even though I wasn't even sick. Why would I ever do something like that? Was it because I'd been asked out by Murata-senpai, my fellow student council member, prompting my classmate Mikura-san to harass me? No, that couldn't be it—that was nothing new to me; I'd been through that sort of situation plenty of times before.

I thought about it as hard as I could and came to a conclusion: I'd skipped school because I'd found something that I considered to be a higher priority. I'd played hooky to throw myself into that something...no, that's not quite right. To catch someone's attention...?

It was no use. I just couldn't remember.

I'd forgotten something incredibly important to me. The reason I'd skipped school, the "something" I'd wanted to prioritize, the passion that must've been burning away within me—it had all vanished. The second I let my guard down, my fear seeped out from me in the form of tears. It felt like my past fifteen years of effort would all go to waste...

I barely managed to muster up the composure I needed to go to school yesterday. It didn't help, though—not even when I got to talk with my friend, Yuu-chan. I had to force myself to plaster a fake smile across my face the whole time, and I burst into tears the moment I got home.

I don't really remember much else after that. I made dinner, talked briefly with my brother, and before I knew it, I was fast asleep and dreaming...

"That's right... My drawings..."

I sat up, turned on the lights, and went over to open up my desk's drawer without even changing out of my pajamas first. That was where I kept my sketchbook. I'd made a habit of drawing in it whenever anything particularly sad, happy, or memorable in general happened to me. I thought that maybe I'd left a hint for myself inside.

I opened up the sketchbook and flipped through its pages, scanning over the pencil sketches that I myself had drawn. If there were any drawings I didn't remember inside it, then surely they would be of whatever it was I was forgetting...?

"Ah..."

I found one. It was the last picture in the book. A picture that I knew was mine—I could recognize my own artistic style—but that I had no memory of drawing.

"Why?"

The drawing was a portrait.

"Why, why...?"

But something was missing.

"It's...gone? But why? Why...?"

The portrait had no face. Or rather, its face had been erased. I could tell from the smudges on the paper that I'd drawn and erased it over and over. I'd tried to draw them properly, but I must have never been satisfied with it. It was obvious that whoever this person was, I considered them unimaginably important to me. Just like how the me from my dreams thought about the boy she knew...

Could it be that I met *him*, or at least someone who filled that same role for the current me...? But then I forgot them...? How? Why...?

As I traced my fingers across the drawing, a strange, conflicted sensation I couldn't explain filled my heart, and I found myself crying again in an instant.

Beepbeepbeepbeep!

I yelped with surprise as my cell phone's alarm brought me back to my senses. It was the time I'd usually get up...meaning I had to go get breakfast ready. I hadn't stopped cooking, even during the week I took off from school.

I'd finally found a lead, but when all was said and done, it just made everything all the more painful. It was like the world itself was telling me that I'd never be able to remember whatever it was I'd forgotten. I shoved the sketchbook back into my desk—like I was running away from it.

“Since I forgot, does that mean that I'd be better off if I never remembered?”

No. It *couldn't*. My heart immediately and violently rebelled against the thought. But then, what could I do? Even after seeing that unfinished portrait, I still wasn't even completely convinced that whatever I'd forgotten was a person. It must've been something that I, myself, *wanted* to forget. The pain, the tears I couldn't stop, were because I was weak. I'm sure *he* would be disgusted with me if he saw me acting like that.

“I can do this...”

I tried to pep myself back up and get in the right mindset to make breakfast, but even I was disappointed by how feeble and unenthusiastic my voice came out.



I managed to calm down a little after I got to school. That was thanks to Yuu-chan, probably—my bright, cheery, ever so slightly derpy best friend. My gloom was quickly swept away whenever she was around. People say that it's easier to face hard times when you have someone else there to be with you, and I was starting to appreciate how true that was.

She wasn't the only distraction at school, though. Right after class ended, a girl leapt into my classroom and scared me half to death.

“Ah, Hikari-chan! You're Ayase Hikari-chan, right?”

“Huh...?”

She had a pretty boyish sort of aura, and even though she was in another class, she burst through all the social barriers revolving around that sort of thing

and strolled right into our class like it was nothing. I knew who she was—she was pretty famous in our school.

“Ah, did I surprise you? My bad,” she continued. “I’m Kazuki Rena! You can just call me Rena, though!”

“All right, Rena-chan. Did you need something?” I replied.

“Yeah, and I know this is gonna sound like it’s coming out of nowhere,” she said, scratching her head a bit bashfully, “but I was wondering if you might wanna study together tomorrow?”

“Study together? With you?” That *was* a surprise. I knew about Rena-chan from the rumors about the incredible first-year who took the track team by storm, but it was my first time properly talking to her.

“Sorta ashamed to admit it, but I’ve had a lot of crazy stuff going on lately, and I haven’t been able to, y’know, sit still and stuff... And I *know* I gotta study since finals’re right around the corner and all... So anyway, I need someone to watch over me and keep me on task! Please?!”

“W-Watch over you?! I’m not so sure about that, but a study group... Um, okay.”

“For real?! Awesome, thanks!”

Rena-chan was ecstatic, and honestly, it was a really timely opportunity for me too. I certainly wouldn’t be able to concentrate if I tried to study at home on my own, so I figured I’d have her return the favor and keep an eye on me as well.

Just then, a quiet, timid voice rang out. “Hikari-chan?”

“Oh, Yuu-chan?”

Yuu-chan was usually incredibly cheerful and more than a little loud, but she was also severely shy. She was openly shrinking away from Rena-chan.

“You’re having a study group?” she asked, a bit fearfully.

“Oh?” cut in Rena-chan before I could answer. “Hikari-chan, who’s this little cutie?”

“I’m Yuu!”

“You’re me?”

“You know who you sorta remind me of, Rena-chan...?” grumbled Yuu-chan.
“You remind me of *that* guy!”

“I dunno who ‘that guy’ is, but I’ll take that as a compliment!”

“It isn’t! It’s the worst insult out there!” I didn’t really understand what they were talking about, but it seemed like Yuu-chan was lowering her walls just a little. Whoever “that guy” was, I assumed he had something to do with it.
“Anyway, back to the study group—I wanna come too! I’ve gotta show Hikari-chan all my notes from the week she missed, after all!”

“The more, the merrier! You don’t mind, right, Hikari-chan?”

“Of course not! Would you like to invite any of your friends too?”

“Nah, it’s cool! I don’t really have many friends to begin with!”

“I don’t really think that’s something you should joke about...” Though of course, Yuu-chan and I couldn’t exactly talk when it came to not having many friends. I decided not to press the issue. Birds of a feather flock together, as they say.



The day of our study group arrived. By pure coincidence, my brother had decided to have a study session with his friends at our house that same day, so we decided to meet up at a library near our school.

“Soooo hot...” I moaned.

“It iiis...” Yuu agreed.

“Yeah,” added Rena, “this is pretty rough...”

The midsummer heat was murderous both inside and out, and we barely lasted a minute before we were down for the count. And, as luck would have it, the library’s air conditioner was on the fritz, meaning that being in there was almost worse than being outside. The air felt stagnant in there—it was so hot and muggy, it felt like we were in a sauna. I was sort of worried it might damage

the books.

“Maybe we should go somewhere else...?” I listlessly suggested. We weren’t going to get any studying done in that climate. The others agreed without hesitation. We left the library and headed towards the nearest of our houses, which happened to be mine. My brother had his own study group going on, but he never told me to stay away, and with only three of us, I figured we could just hole up in my room if we had to.

“Now that I think about it, Ayase-senpai’s probably at your house, huh?” mentioned Rena-chan offhandedly.

“You know my brother?”

“Yeah, we’ve met! Plus, I...”

“You...?”

She hesitated for a moment. “Nah, never mind, not important.” She chuckled, and it sort of felt like she was trying to brush the topic aside. Did something happen between her and my brother? At the very least, she didn’t seem reluctant to go to my house. “You’re okay with going over there, right, Yuu-chan?”

“This’ll be my first time at Hikari-chan’s house! I’m super duper curious!”

“I don’t think there’s anything at my house worth being curious about...” The most I could do in reply to Yuu-chan’s overly elevated expectations was let out a strained laugh.

Thankfully, the library wasn’t far from my house at all. It was easily within walking distance, and we had just enough time to make some pleasant, getting-to-know-each-other small talk before we arrived.

It was my own house, of course, but I knew that my brother’s friends would be in, so I couldn’t help but be a bit stealthy as I opened the door and peeked inside. I heard the other two quietly mumble “excuse us” as they stepped inside, so they must have been in the same mindset. You’d think we were trying to sneak up on someone to play a prank.

“Oh? Sounds like they’re really living it up in there,” commented Rena-chan.

“And isn’t that voice...?” Yuu-chan, meanwhile, was quietly growling.

It was true—they *were* making an awful lot of noise in the living room. I wasn’t sure why Rena-chan and Yuu-chan seemed so interested, but the voices were definitely catching my attention as well. One of them was Tsumugi-chan, but the other...was the voice of a boy I didn’t know.

No...the voice of a boy I *shouldn’t* have known. I felt like I’d heard him somewhere before, though. Most likely I’d just heard him in passing at school, at some point or another...but somehow, strangely, I couldn’t get his voice out of my head. It was a mysterious feeling...like I’d heard him before, somewhere a long, long time ago. I felt a tightness in my chest, and the corners of my eyes were strangely warm.

I mustered up my nerve and looked back at the others. “Should we go see what’s happening in there?” They both nodded in agreement, and I reached for the doorknob. As I grabbed it, I noticed that my palm was oddly sweaty. Was I nervous? Nervous to meet that voice’s owner?

That voice... I really do know it from somewhere. But, no... It couldn’t be, right...?

My thought process was a chaotic, jumbled mess, but I took a long, deep breath and forced myself to calm down. Then I opened the door.

“I’m home, Kaito! What’s going on in—”

“BOOBS! ARE!!! FOREVER!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

In that instant, the atmosphere in the room completely froze, and so did everyone in it. The three of us surely looked utterly horrified. I glanced around the room at everyone else, including the boy standing in the center who’d just shouted with all his might, and noticed they all had similar looks painted on their faces. His eyes were wide open, and he was staring straight at me. I was staring right back at him as well. I’d never seen him before...no, I *had*. I’d seen him somewhere. And I knew that it hadn’t just been in passing. I knew him. I just couldn’t remember. I couldn’t remember him at all.

My chest hurt. I could barely breathe. I couldn’t tear my eyes off him. It was like I’d been compelled by a magical spell to be powerfully, irresistibly drawn to

him. To that boy, whose name I didn't even know. I was barely paying attention to the conversation, even as I participated in it—I was focused almost entirely on him. It felt like his name was on the tip of my tongue, but it just wouldn't come out. I'd never felt anything like it—it was frustrating, heartbreaking, and infuriating all at once.

“And, umm, the boy who's collapsed over there would be...?” I finally asked.

“Oh, right, that's Kou,” replied my brother. “I've told you about him before, right?”

“Kou... O-Oh, yes, that's right! Kou-san—I mean, Kou-senpai.”

Kou-san. The moment I said it, I was overwhelmed by the strangest sense of nostalgia. I knew him. I really did know him. The moment I said his name out loud, I was certain of it. I'd called him by that name before. But still, I just couldn't remember. I didn't know when or where I'd met him. My heart was pounding out of my chest; it felt like I'd end up grinning like an idiot the second I let my guard down, and my tear ducts felt like they were moments away from opening up the floodgates. But still, I couldn't remember the first thing about him.

I knew that he was the mysterious something I'd forgotten about. I had no idea *why* I couldn't remember him. Maybe I'd lost the memories in an accident, or maybe they'd somehow been taken from me. But I knew one thing for sure:

I loved him. No—I still love him. No matter how many memories I lose, I will never forget that one, simple fact. It's like it's engraved into my very soul. He might even be *him*, the boy from my dreams... But, no, that might be setting my expectations too high...

It might have been, and yet the pounding of my heart, the emotions welling up within me... Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to think of them as *mine* alone.

Side Story 2: Kotou Tsumugi and the App of Mystery

One day, Kotou asked me to hang out during lunchtime. Having Kaito's ever-hyper childhood friend breeze right past him to ask *me* to hang out instead threw me for a bit of a loop. What's a best friend sidekick supposed to do in a situation like that?

Wait, though. Could it be...? Is she trying to set up a surprise for him or something? Maybe she's trying to do something special to make her beloved Kaito happy and wants to pull me in as a collaborator!

I nodded, instantly sold on my own logic. That'd perfectly explain her wanting to talk to me and only me. All her weirdness aside, I guess she had a girly side to her after all! I mean, I already knew she liked cooking and stuff, but you know what I mean.

"Heeey, Kotou?" I called as I walked up to her. She was standing in the corner of one of the hallways, just where she'd said she'd be.

"Ah, Kunugicchi! Shh! Keep quiet and come with me!" She grabbed my arm and dragged me off without another word.

"Hey, whoa, where're you taking me?"

"Somewhere where nobody else'll see us!"

"Why?! Actually...yeah, that makes sense. Real cautious of you."

"Wait. What?! You don't mean you figured out what I'm going for, do you?!"

"I think I've got a pretty good guess, anyway."

"Mnnnghh... You win this round... But whatever! That'll make things quicker anyway!" She grimaced for just a moment before immediately turning her attitude back around again, then pulled me away once more.

"So, where're we going, specifically?"

"The gym storehouse!"

“The gym storehooouse?!”

The gym storehouse: a notoriously private place on any campus, and a spot that’s perceived in *very* different ways by those who currently attend school and those who’re out of the system. I’m to understand that people who aren’t active high school students see it as a place where students go to perv it up in secret, but to people like me who still go to school, it’s a place you only ever visit when you have to set up or break down gear for gym class.

In other words: it’s basically just a pain, and that’s not even getting started on the dust and the stench of moldering sweat. It really couldn’t have a worse image in my mind. The only people who could do the nasty in a mold garden like that are the sort of folks whose houses look like garbage dumps...probably.

Anyway, it goes without saying that I had no clue why she’d go out of her way to take me there of all places. That wasn’t much of a surprise, though—Kotou was a true wild child who ranked at the top of the list of people whose thought patterns I couldn’t decipher at all. For all I knew, she might’ve been planning to set the storehouse on fire in retaliation for some horrible experience she had in gym class somewhere along the way. Speaking as her friend, I’d have to do everything I could to stop her if that really was what she was plotting.

So anyway, long story short, there we were at the storehouse. We were on lunch break, but nobody was out and about playing around with the balls that were kept in there. I dunno what that says about our student body—is not messing around during lunch break wholesome, or what?

“Okay, looks like the coast is clear,” muttered Kotou as she glanced around, then opened up the storehouse. We stepped inside, and she immediately turned around and locked the door. *Wait, isn’t this...a locked room?!*

“Wait a second—you’re not planning on murdering me, are you, Kotou?!”

“What? Why would I do *that*? I don’t want *you* on my criminal record, Kunugicchi!”

“Wow, way to turn that into an insult! You couldn’t have phrased it like ‘I wouldn’t kill my precious friend’ or something?”

“My ‘precious friend’?”

“Ouch! *Ouch!*” *Right* in the heart! The fact that she didn’t sound like she meant anything bad by it made it even worse! “Anyway, I knew it—this place really does reek of mold... Hey, make sure nobody’s hiding under the pommel horse, okay? That’s the usual formula in these situations—somebody’s lurking around in here and then all of a sudden we show up...”

“What ‘usual formula’...?” She cocked her head, crouching down to check. “Nope, nobody’s down there.”

“Phew! The other usual formula’s for a crazed bomber to have slipped into the school and be staking out in there. We’d be totally screwed if we got that one.”

“Do crazed bombers really turn up that often?” She sounded exasperated with me, but she was also carefully checking every place in the room where someone could possibly be hiding, and quite a few that were way too small for anyone to hide in as well, just for good measure. *I really wouldn’t if I were you—that’s exactly the sort of behavior that leads to you finding the Bug That Shall Not Be Named but Starts with the Letter C and totally freaking out!*

“All right, check complete! At the present moment, you and I are the only people within this room!” she declared confidently.

“What’s with the narration? Are you setting up a magic trick or something?”

“Time to cut to the chase—take a look at this!”

“Huh?” Kotou shoved her phone into my face. The whole screen was occupied by some sort of weird symbol that was shifting in a sort of unsettling manner.

“What am I looking at?”

“Huh? You’re not feeling anything?”

“Am I supposed to be feeling something?”

“Like, you don’t suddenly wanna obey my every word without question, or anything like that?”

“Why would I? Is that supposed to be, like, a police badge? What are you, an undercover cop?” *Nah, that couldn’t be it.* The image on her phone was

unsettling in a way I couldn't quite describe properly, and it definitely didn't project any sort of authority. Kotou pouted, clearly disappointed, but I seriously had no idea what she'd been expecting in the first place. She mumbled in irritation as she sat down next to me on the gym mat I'd appropriated as a chair.

"So, what's that supposed to be?"

"A hypnosis app."

"A hypnosis app?!" I never could've seen that answer coming. A hypnosis app, as in...like, what the hell?!

"The instructions said that whoever I showed this picture to would be instantly hypnotized and would do whatever I told them to."

"So it's one of those porny ones."

"Yup, one of those porny ones."

If you spend enough time on the internet, you'll probably run into one of those borderline pornographic pop-up ads before long. Little comics featuring hypnosis apps being used for unscrupulous purposes have become a trend in them lately. Feels like there've been more and more of them recently.

"And care to explain why a high school maiden like you would know about those?"

"I mean, c'mon, they pop up all the time! You end up remembering them whether you like it or not."

"Okay, but y'know the thing about pop-ups these days? I dunno how exactly they get the info, but the ones you get shown are based on your own search history. You wouldn't be seeing ads with hypnosis apps and smutty stuff if you weren't browsing sites like that on your own, right?"

"It's not like 'high school maidens' don't look up porn, you know?" She gave me a "no shit" sort of look. I can't say I saw that coming, but, I mean, she had a point. Puberty hits girls just as hard as it does guys. Guess we're all the same when it comes to being interested in that sorta stuff.

"You're *definitely* the first person I've seen actually get their hands on a

hypnosis app, though.”

“I just looked it up on Gurgle Play. Popped right up.”

“Of course it did.”

Allow me to explain! Gurgle Play is a smartphone app that allows you to download *other* smartphone apps! Yes, that’s right—it’s an app that makes apps, thereby transcending the principle of equivalent exchange! “Gurgle,” by the way, is a website that lets you search for things on the internet. You’re probably wondering what it has to do with Gurgle Play, and, er... Go ask your mom and dad about it! Bonus fact: when you search for something on the internet, we call that “gurgling it.” Try using that phrase at school tomorrow! All your friends will be super impressed!

“Look, see?” Kotou showed me her phone again. It had the instructions for the app on it that time, and they were, well, basic. It really did more or less just say, “Show the screen to someone and they’ll be hypnotized!” With such a simple and straightforward UI, even old folks who grew up in the age before smartphones could use it!

“Question.”

“Ask away, Kunugicchi-kun!”

“Wouldn’t this end up hypnotizing *you*?”

“Wha?”

“I mean, you see the screen when you start up the app, right?”

“Oh, I guess so... But *I’m* not the person I’m trying to hypnotize, so it wouldn’t work, right?”

“How would the app figure out who you are and aren’t trying to hypnotize? Your smartphone’s not *that* smart—it can’t tell who’s using it.”

“Hmm... But you can communicate with your phone and stuff, can’t you? Like, the whole ‘okay Gurgle’ thing?” *Ping!* Kotou’s phone swapped over from the hypnosis app to the voice recognition screen. “Ah, no! That’s not what I meant!”

“*I’m sorry, I do not understand.*”

Kotou growled at her phone. She looked like she was just about ready to throw down with it.

“If that’s what you call communicating, I’d hate to see the alternative,” I said as I lightly chopped her on the head. You can’t drop a line like that without a snappy comeback smack. “Anyway, what were you even planning on doing with a hypnosis app? Why would you need to make someone follow your every... Wait. This situation—in the storehouse—wait, no, seriously?”

“I’m pretty sure I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong.”

“How can you be so sure about that?!”

“Uhh, because it’s about *me*? Of course I do.”

I paused. “I, uhh, meant, ‘How can you be so sure you know what I’m thinking?’”

“C’mon, this is *you* we’re talking about! You were thinking that I was planning on hypnotizing you and making you do dirty stuff with me, right? You pervy little monkey!” *Yup. Spot on. Can’t object. And honestly, if she had been thinking along those lines, it would’ve meant trouble in like a thousand different ways, so I’m sorta relieved she was right after all.* “I was just testing it on you, that’s all! You were my guinea pig.”

“Ouch!”

“You gotta be merciless about these things to get by! It’s like how nobles used to raise pigs for fun, only to eat them in the end—you’ve gotta accept that this world’s a cruel, unfeeling place and just roll with it.”

“What a tragic world we live in.” *In other words, I’m no different than a pig to the slaughter. Actually, you couldn’t even eat me in the end, so I’m worth even less than that.* “Just hypothetically, what would you’ve ordered me to do if it *had* worked?”

“Not telling! It’s super embarrassing.”

“Oh, come *on*.”

“It would’ve been fine if you’d been hypnotized since you wouldn’t have known what was happening, but you’re totally aware right now! I don’t wanna

expose all my deep, secret desires!”

“You’re sensitive about the weirdest things.” We’d already more or less confirmed that she wasn’t planning on giving any lewd orders, so how could it possibly be that bad? And what could possibly be more embarrassing than getting taken in by an obviously fake hypnosis app and actually trying to use it?

“Well... I was thinking I’d have you hand over all your cash or something.”

“You were gonna *mug* me?!”

“Hey, high school maidens have to work on a high school budget! A girl’s gonna have priorities!”

“Yeah, okay, money’s important; you got me there!” I figure a lot of people would jump right to thinking about how to make money if they somehow got their hands on supernatural powers. We get led around by the nose by money from the moment we’re born to the moment we die, when all’s said and done. “And when your little clinical trial was over, what next? Were you gonna use it on Kaito?”

“Huh? Why would I do that?”

“Wait, you weren’t?”

“Nah, ’course not. What are you, stupid?” *And now she’s treating me like an idiot! Actually, I think I might’ve weirded her out. I was so sure she’d use it on Kaito and fulfill all her raging hormonal desires.* “I wouldn’t use something like this on anyone other than you, Kunugicchi! I mean, c’mon, it’s dangerous, right? What if the hypnosis never goes away, and you end up spending the rest of your life as a spaced-out vegetable?”

“Fair enough... Wait, no, you thought that was on the table and tried it on me without a word of explanation anyway? That’s pretty horrible of you, don’t you think, Kotou-san?!”

“I would’ve taken responsibility if you got vegetablized!” she said, holding up her head proud and tall. Not that what she said was anything to be proud about... And yet, I found myself just a little moved anyway. I never imagined that Kotou valued her friendship with me that deeply! “I’d take responsibility and dump you in the ocean!”

“Don’t *kill* me!”

“Ha ha ha, kidding, kidding! But for real, though, you’re the only one I could count on for something like this. I mean, you and Kaito are the only guys I’m even friends with.”

“What? Don’t you have tons of guy friends?”

“I mean, like, the sort of friends you can talk about stupid crap with,” she clarified with a slightly bashful grin. “I was really happy when you made friends with Kaito, of course, but I was *super* happy when you made friends with me too! I mean, you’re a moron, and a weirdo, and a real pervert sometimes, and honestly, you gross me the heck out, like, all the time...”

“Going pretty heavy on the insults, aren’t you?”

“But y’know, people say I’m a weirdo all the time too. I mean, Kaito’s all calm and mild-mannered, and his sister Hikari-chan’s super straitlaced too. I’ve been hanging out with the two of them since forever ago, and I always had to drag them around whenever we did stuff... Our relationship being like that’s probably how I ended up being such a hyper person, I guess.”

“Kotou...”

“I’ve got plenty of girls I’m friends with, but every once in a while it feels like we’re just not on the same wavelength. So, I mean,” she giggled, “I guess what I’m trying to say is thanks for being friends with...nah, I can’t! This is getting way too awkward! Sorry, forget about it!”

“Kotou...you’re trying to steer this in an emotional direction to make me forget about the hypnosis app thing, aren’t you?”

“Ugh!” Kotou let out a sharp grunt and made a face of pure astonishment. Judging by the speed of that reaction, she was *definitely* trying to change the topic on purpose. *That was close... I almost took her seriously for a minute, there.*

“Now that I think about it, this means I have dirt on you, doesn’t it? I’m the only person who knows that you’re a perverted demon who’d try to manipulate people with a hypnosis app.”

“I-I told you I wasn’t gonna do anything pervy with it!”

“Sure you weren’t—but most people would get super skeeved out if they heard about a girl who tried to hypnotize a boy like that, don’t you think?”

“Ugh... Okay, yeah... That’d freak me out too...”

“Hmm, maybe I should go spread this info around? I could tell Kaito, Kiryu, and tons of other people too...”

“You monster!”

“Like you’re one to talk!”

“Take this! *Hypnosis!*”

“Think we already established that it doesn’t work!”

In the end, Kotou decided that the only way to deal with my pesky memories was to literally beat them out of my head. She chased me around the storehouse all the way to the end of lunchtime. Needless to say, I didn’t have any time at all to actually eat lunch.

“*Achoo!*”

“Whoa, did you catch a cold or something, Kou? You looked fine this morning.”

“Nah, just got a little too much dust in my lungs...” My storehouse chase with Kotou had kicked up all the dust in the room, and my nose was completely shot. She and I both spent the rest of the day in a miserable, sneezy hell.

And we all lived happily ever after.

Afterword

It's been getting pretty cold lately, hasn't it? I hope you've all been holding up well!

Thank you very much for purchasing the second volume of *The Sidekick Never Gets the Girl, Let Alone the Protag's Sister!* This is the author who can never seem to remember their own titles, Toshizo, speaking.

This second volume opens with an aside regarding what happened to our protagonist (as in the protagonist of the actual book, not in the meta sense) Kunugi Kou in the other world. Our world's absolutely overflowing with stories about folks getting reincarnated or dragged into other worlds these days, isn't it? The ones that dig into how the protagonist uses modern knowledge and tools to enact sweeping reforms are particularly interesting, in my book.

But really, if you were *actually* thrown into an uncivilized world or a world that's developed using some totally different form of technology—say, by using magic instead of using the science we rely on in the real world—there's no guarantee that you'd actually be able to successfully play the hero like all those protagonists do. At the very least, I don't think I'd stand a chance. Sadly, I just don't have the right sort of brain for it.

I'm afraid to say that the same was probably true for young Kunugi Kou. Even after getting granted all sorts of special powers, I'm sure he screwed up, ran away, and suffered time and time again. Being a Hero who's fated to save the world would be way too heavy a burden for a child like him to bear on his own—no, actually, I think it'd be too much even for an adult.

The moment of recollection I wrote for him in this volume portrays a brief period of peace in his life, as well as the beginning of the seemingly eternal cycle of suffering he'd be wrapped up in from then onward. After returning to the modern world, the powers and experience that he attained in the other world are both akin to a curse and yet also the one thing that he knows for sure he can rely on.

As for why I made the backstory so darn dark... Well, I'm sure there are plenty of people out there who think, "Why not have him succeed in the other world, then go back to the real world and use his powers to succeed there too?!" and honestly, same. Like, don't I feel sorry for poor Kunugi-kun?! Not to mention Hikari-chan, who went through all sorts of awful stuff too, thanks to all that nonsense! (Witness me, the self-flagellating author.)

But I'm afraid to say that this train's already running wild, and there's no stopping it now. I believe that the things you gain by overcoming hardship are all the more precious because of the tough times you went through to get to them. As one of this story's writers, I'd like to keep guiding it in that direction. Not that this story has more than one writer to begin with! Hah!

Once again, I'd like to extend my sincerest thanks to the many parties who helped make this novel a reality. In particular to U35, who was in charge of the illustrations. Personally speaking, the drawings of the other world's characters were so incredible I seriously couldn't deal with it. This was true of volume one as well, but putting illustrations in a book really takes it to the next level in an instant. Really makes me think, "Holy crap, books are incredible!" I'd also like to thank all the kind individuals at the publishing house and my editor as well. The oranges you sent to help me through the summer were super tasty.

Finally, more than anyone else, I'd like to thank all the readers who've been following my work since I first posted it on Shosetsuka ni Naro. I truly can't thank you enough for continuing to buy my novels. It's thanks to you that *Sidekick* was born as a published work, and it's thanks to you that I was born as an author. I intend to do my absolute best to not let down everyone who's cheered me on for all this time.

Once again, to all of you who purchased this book, thank you very much! I hope you'll keep enjoying *Sidekick* in the future!

—Toshizo (November 2019)







Bonus Short Story

One Stormy Day

A roll of thunder rumbled in the distance. The boy who had been reading while sitting on a nearby stool sat up with a grunt of surprise.

“Hey, Koh, it’s gonna rain.”

“Looks like it, yeah.” The storm still sounded far away, but the valley felt even gloomier than it usually did. It was hard to tell from down where we were, but I assumed the sky was overcast.

“Mind if we head home early today?” asked Balrog. “I’m sorta worried about Rei.”

“About Rei? Why, did something happen?”

“Oooh? What, you *worried* about her or something?” Balrog smirked. That childish expression he always made when he was about to make fun of me sort of got on my nerves.

“You’re the one who said you were worried in the first place,” I snapped back.

“Fair enough. But nah, it’s just that she’s not great at dealing with lightning.”

“So? I’d be more surprised if you told me she *could* take a hit.”

“Wait, what?”

“I mean, it’s a super powerful bolt of electricity from the sky. Most people would die if they took one of those directly.”

“I didn’t mean getting *struck* by lightning! That’s just as scary for me as it is for her! You really are a few eggs short of a dozen, aren’t you, Koh?” he added, taking great care to make it clear he was trash-talking me. He was still smirking, but the smirk was twitching a little. “Okay, so maybe I should’ve said ‘thunder.’ Rei’s not scared of being hit by lightning, she’s scared of the sound it makes. It’s really loud and spooky, you know?”

“The sound, huh... I see what you mean.” Being blind, Rei’s sense of hearing was especially sensitive. Sudden, violent noises like thunder would probably be terrifying, especially when they can get loud enough to literally shake the building you’re in.

“They say the thunder gods will eat your belly button if you’re not careful... Not that it’s true in the slightest.”

“Your belly button? What?”

“It’s just a superstition. I think. I don’t really know, myself.”

“You say the weirdest stuff sometimes, Koh.”

“Lay off. The point is that you’re worried about Rei, right? Let’s hurry back.” We quickly packed up and departed from our hut in the valley. It had already started drizzling at that point.



“Whoa, it’s really coming down! If this was a race, then the storm would’ve *crushed* us!”

“Only because I was matching your pace.”

I’d heard the sharp crack of thunder several times over the course of our trip back. It was still the middle of the day, but you’d never know it given how dark and gloomy it was outside. There wasn’t a villager around who’d venture out in weather like that.

“Sorry, Koh, but can you head home first? There’s something I want to take care of on my way back.”

“Got it. Say hi to Lyra for me.”

“I-I never said I was going to see her!”

“Guess you didn’t. Must’ve just jumped to conclusions.” In spite of his overblown reaction, Balrog ran straight for Lyra’s house. I waited a moment, watching him go, then headed toward the house he shared with Rei.

“I’m back!” I called as I walked inside.

“Koh!” Rei immediately rushed over and clung to me. Something was

obviously wrong.

“Oh, whoa... What’re you doing in the entryway, Rei? And, uh...you know I’m soaking wet, right?” I tried to make light of the situation, but I couldn’t really think of anything to say that would be even remotely funny, and my sarcasm had zero effect because I really *was* soaking wet.

She just kept clinging to me, shivering, until another clap of thunder rang out. She shrieked. I could tell by the sound that it hadn’t struck anywhere nearby, but that didn’t seem to make it any less scary for her.

“Koh... Umm, I’m...”

“It’s fine; don’t worry about it. Could you let go of me, though?” She was clearly shocked by my request. She practically jumped away from me, stumbling backwards and curling into a ball. I realized too late that I’d been a little too direct with my phrasing.

“I-I’m sorry,” she stammered, “I should’ve said something first, or—”

“No, that’s not it! I just meant you should let go for a moment so I can get changed. I got caught in the rain, so I’m totally soaked, and if I got you wet too, we might both end up getting sick. I’ll get changed, and then you can use me as a teddy bear for however long you want!” I clarified myself as quickly as I could, taking her hand and helping her to her feet.

I needed to move over to Balrog’s room to change, but I couldn’t exactly leave her on her own in the entryway, so I slowly led her by the hand through the dark house. My careless phrasing a moment before must have really bothered her. She didn’t squeeze my hand like she usually would, but instead just quietly followed along after me without saying a word.

“Okay... Guess I can deal with my laundry later.” I left my wet clothes lying on the ground. Balrog—or rather, Lyra, who came over to his house so often she was practically his live-in helper—would probably chew me out for it, but I was in no position to put them away properly. I threw on a dry shirt and pair of pants, then went over to Rei, who was huddled up in a corner of the room.

“Rei?”

“Koh, I...” I could tell from her tone that I really *had* made her depressed.

She'd never had an excess of self-confidence to begin with, and I couldn't blame her for interpreting my words as rejection.

"I'm sorry, Rei." I held her close as gently as I could, taking care not to startle her. "It's all right now. I'm not going anywhere—I'll stay with you for as long as you want me to."

"Koh..."

"I was a little happy that you called for me when I walked in, actually. I sort of thought you'd say Balrog's name." If Balrog had happened to be the one who walked in instead of me, he probably wouldn't have taken it well. Imagining the look on his face was oddly satisfying. He was definitely a bad influence on me—I'd started picking up his habit of teasing people, and Rei was suffering the consequences. She was blushing brightly, her lips trembling with embarrassment.

"I-I-I didn't mean to—it just slipped out!"

"My name just slipped out?"

"Ah, no, I mean..." I questioned her without really thinking about it, and she mumbled incoherently. "It's just that I'm scared of thunder. It's so loud, it sounds like a giant's stomping around right next to me. Part of me's always worried that someday, that giant will step right on me..."

She'd probably read something along those lines in one of her books. It wasn't an unreasonable fear to have, though, considering she'd never seen actual lightning for herself.

"The thunder woke me up today, and nobody else was around, and I got so scared... I wanted to go out and find you."

"Wait—you weren't trying to go outside when I got back, were you?"

She paused for a moment, then practically whispered, "I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay..." I was really glad I got home when I did, in retrospect. Part of me regretted not leaving that slowpoke Balrog behind and rushing back as fast as I could. "Everything's all right now, Rei," I reassured her.

"I know..." It felt like she'd finally started to relax. I could feel the tension

draining away from her body, which was reassuring for me as well. “Umm, Koh? This might be too forward of me, but, umm...I’d like it if you’d hug me a little tighter, please...”

“Tighter?”

“Tight enough that I, umm, know I won’t slip away from you...”

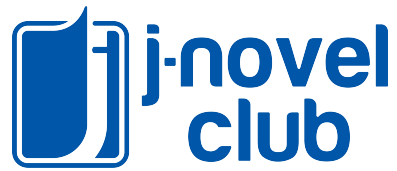
“Okay, got it. I’m a little worried I might snap you like a twig, though.”

“Oh, *Koh!*” She gave me that look that told me she was trying to pout, but she wasn’t actually upset and couldn’t really pull it off. That time around, I really did manage to ease the tension—at least well enough. “If I could be in your arms when it happened, though,” she muttered, “that might not be so bad.”

I wasn’t from their village. Eventually, I’d have to leave and return to my life as a Hero. I’d never told her about any of that, but I had a feeling that she knew on some level we’d have to part someday.

But that would be some *other* day. On that day, I was there for her. I could provide her with peace of mind amid the terror of the thunderstorm. That alone was enough for me. I smiled, pulled her closer and held her just a little more tightly.

“Don’t even joke about that.”



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The Sidekick Never Gets the Girl, Let Alone the Protag's Sister! Volume 2

by Toshizo

Translated by Tristan K. Hill Edited by Samantha J. Moore

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by PASH! Books This English edition is published by arrangement with PASH! Books, Tokyo English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2021

Premium E-Book